DEAD MEN'S SHOES.

DEAD MEN'S SHOES

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'
ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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To Sir J. CORDY BURROWS, J.P.,
BRIGHTON.

Dear Sir Cordy Burrows,

If anything can justify the dedication of a book to any one, it surely must be a friendship that has lasted nearly twenty years; marked on your side by many acts of care and kindness, and on mine by a most sincere appreciation of your genial and generous nature. I have therefore great pleasure in recording this fact, and I have still greater pleasure in dedicating this story to you.

Believe me,
Dear Sir Cordy Burrows,
Very sincerely yours,
THE AUTHOR.

Richmond,
February, 1876.

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DEAD MEN'S SHOES.

CHAPTER I.

'PLUNGED IN THE DEPTH OF HELPLESS POVERTY.'

A GIRL-WOMAN alone on Battersea Bridge, reading a letter in the December sunset—one of those mild autumnal afternoons which hang upon the skirts of winter. A girl in years—a woman in cares. Dark brown eyes set in a pale, sharply set face; mouth rosy and beautiful in form, but too firm in its lines to be altogether lovely in a woman. A girl whom the passers by look at interrogatively, wondering that so much beauty should go alone, and so poorly clad. Her clothes are not common, but shabby—a black silk dress that has once been handsome and fashionable; a black felt hat trimmed with threadbare velvet; a sealskin jacket worn bald at the edges, and dull with exposure to hard weather; gloves which indicate that to be gloved at all has cost the wearer a struggle; boots whose decay is no less evident than the symmetry of the slender feet they cover. She walks listlessly up and down the pavement of the bridge—just the one quiet promenade to be found in this neighbourhood—reading a letter from home, or the place which was her home two years ago. She has seen much of the world during these two years,—in her own opinion too much, for she has seen not the fair and shining fabric in life's loom, but the ragged sleave thereof.

This is the letter which she reads, not once, but three times over, with deepest attention, as she paces up and down the quiet old bridge, while the sunset fades from the cold gray river, and from that Dutch picture of old red roofs and water-side shanties on the Middlesex shore, which painters have loved, and which the Thames Embankment may perchance have blotted out by this time:—

'*Redcastle, December* 11*th*, 186–.

'MY DEAR SIBYL,

'An event has happened which I think likely to exercise a wonderful influence for good upon all our lives. Stephen Trenchard, your mother's brother, the uncle Stephen you have all talked about as children, and whose wealth was your poor mother's boast, has returned to England, after nearly thirty years' absence, yellow, wrinkled, withered, and eccentric in manners and habits, but I think not unkindly disposed to any of us. He has taken a house at Redcastle, and is anxious to have his nieces about him, as he calls it. Marion has already exchanged the discomforts and deprivations of a parish doctor's household for the Oriental luxuries of Lancaster Lodge. I dare say you remember the house, a square stone building with two tall iron gates, and two lodges within thirty yards of the hall door. Some people will have grandeur at the sacrifice of consistency. He seems—I mean your uncle Stephen—to have taken a great fancy to Marion. I meet her lolling in his barouche, trying to look as if she had been accustomed to ride in a three hundred guinea carriage all her life, and really doing it very well. Jenny has also been to see her uncle, but he thought her rough and uncultivated, and I fear that, with her present deficiency of manners, she has little chance of pleasing him. I have sent her to Miss Mercer's, as a day scholar, since Michaelmas, but as she *will* talk to the boys going and returning, I really think the change is doing her more harm than good. I have dined with Mr. Trenchard, and can assure you that the splendour of his table is something to remember. I don't pretend to be a judge of wines, though I could give you a lecture upon tannic acid, alcohol, and so on—experience, to my mind, being better than theory, and my opportunities of the rarest—but I know that after dining with Stephen Trenchard I felt as if my veins ran quicksilver. Well, my dear, I want you to have your chance as well as Marion, and I think the best and wisest course for you will be to beg a month's holiday from your employer, Mrs. Hazleton, and come to spend Christmas with your poor old uncle Robert. No doubt if you do, your rich old uncle Stephen will ask you to transfer your society to Lancaster Lodge, and then you and Marion will have equal chances. I dare say it will end by his asking one or both of you to live with him and keep his house. He has, I believe, something like a million to leave behind him, and you three girls are his nearest relations, and his natural heirs. He has spoken very kindly of your mother.

'Let me know what Mrs. Hazleton says about a holiday. If a month is too much you might ask for a fortnight. I should think it most unlikely that you need ever return to her. With such a man as old Trenchard for your uncle, and well disposed towards you, your teaching days ought to be over.

'Your affectionate Uncle,

'ROBERT FAUNTHORPE.'

'My teaching days,' repeats the young woman, bitterly. 'He little knows that they were the height of luxury compared to what has come after them.'

The letter is addressed to—

MISS FAUNTHORPE,
AT MRS. HAZLETON'S, 19, LOWTHER STREET,
ECCLESTON SQUARE.

It has been re-addressed by an humble friend of Miss Faunthorpe's, in the person of Mrs. Hazleton's housemaid, who has enclosed the letter in an envelope directed to—

MRS. STANMORE,
At Mrs. Bonny's, 11, Dixon Street,
Chelsea.

An address which indicates a descent in the social scale from the semi-Belgravian gentility of Lowther Street, Eccleston Square. And how comes Miss Faunthorpe to be Mrs. Stanmore, while her affectionate uncle, Robert Faunthorpe, remains unaware of a transmutation which must needs have some influence for good or evil on his niece's future career? Marriage is one of those inadvertences which can hardly go for nothing even in the easiest life.

'So Marion is exhibiting herself about Redcastle in a three hundred guinea barouche,' says Mrs. Stanmore, putting the letter in her pocket, 'while I have hardly shoes to my feet. I—who was supposed to be the handsome sister, and the clever sister, and the lucky sister! And I dare not show my face in Redcastle, not even if half a million of money is to be lost by my absence. To think that uncle Stephen should choose just this particular time for his return; to think that he should return at all, when Marion and I made up our minds ever so long ago that he was little better than a myth, and was sure to have married a begum without telling anybody, and to die in India, leaving all his money to horrid copper-coloured children. Lucky for Marion!'

Then, after a pause, leaving the bridge and entering the shabby street leading to Cheyne Walk, she continues her self-communing thus:—

'What shall I say to uncle Robert? Suppose he were to come to town and call at Mrs. Hazleton's. He may have money now to pay for the journey. It was safe enough before. Poor uncle Robert never had a spare pound, or ever wasted a shilling, except the shillings he had to pay for summonses because of being behindhand with the taxes. If he should come up to London? Or if uncle Stephen should be in town and call in Lowther Street? More likely that. Anglo-Indians are such active creatures. What am I to do?'

Thus disjointedly run her thoughts, as she walks —very quickly now—along the narrow, shabby street, past the fried-fish shop, and the pork butcher's, and the emporium for second-hand goods —from a picture of the Holy Family, after Raffaelle, very much framed, to a flat iron, or a pair of bluchers—the greengrocer's, also coal merchant, the cook-shop, with its steam-tarnished windows and reeking odour of boiled beef and stick-jaw pudding.

'That reminds me,' Mrs. Stanmore says to herself, as the reek of cooked provisions salutes her nostrils, 'there's nothing for dinner.'

She pauses and takes counsel with herself. Her eye wanders from the cook-shop to the fishmonger's, thence ranges to the pork butcher's. Her election lies among these. Cambridge sausages are savoury, but dear; and Mrs. Bonny, the landlady, has a trick of overdoing all things entrusted to her culinary art. A pound of Cambridge sausages, reduced to grounds and grease, are hardly worth the shilling they cost. Boiled beef is expensive and weighs heavy. For a cheap relish, a zest which shall make bread and butter supply the place of dinner, your fishmonger is your best friend. Mrs. Stanmore patronizes the finny tribe. She selects an eightpenny haddock, dried and salted, from the merchant's store, and carries it home with her, rolled up in brown paper. She stops at the cheap baker's for a half-quartern loaf, with which the bit over is not unacceptable. 'I wonder what Marion would think if she could see me now?' she asks herself; 'Marion who always complained of my pride, and called herself the Cinderella of the family. Her Cinderella-ship never brought her so low as this.'

Home! bitter mockery of a sweet word. She turns out of the shabby street into a street still shabbier, narrow, dirty, and out at elbows. Yet at its worst not quite so bad as a modern street under the same conditions, for the red brick houses are substantial and roomy, and the worm-eaten oaken window-frames shut out the wind better than the speculative builder's warped and shrunken deal.

The house which Mrs. Stanmore enters is dark and gloomy. The wail of a fretful child sounds from the basement as she lets herself in at the street door with a convenient latch-key. A glimmer from the kitchen stairs is the only light visible, and to this glimmer Mrs. Stanmore seems to address herself.

'I've brought home a haddock, Mrs. Bonny. Will you be kind enough to broil it at six o'clock?'

'Oh, very well,' answers a querulous voice from unseen depths below. 'You can put the 'addock on the window-sill. I'll come and fetch it when I've got time; but I can't say nothink about its being done by six, for my fire's got low after ironin'. The parlour has gone out to tea.'

This last remark has a reproachful sound, as who should say, 'You never spare me trouble by going out visiting.'

Mrs. Stanmore deposits the dried fish, and ascends the dark, old-fashioned staircase, smelling of mice, whose hurried scamper is audible behind the mouldering wainscot. One room, the first floor front, comprises Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore's share of number eleven, Dixon Street. It is happily a rather large room, with three windows, provided with old-fashioned window-seats. The furniture is old like the house, worn and dingy, but solid furniture that has served several generations of housekeepers and a ragged regiment of lodgers. In the glow of a cheery little fire the dim old room has a homely, not unfriendly look. The old tent bedstead has been pushed into the most obscure corner. There are two arm-chairs, with faded chintz covers, a sofa, large and ponderous. There is a round table opposite the wide old fireplace, and another table against the wall, surmounted by a japanned iron tea-tray of a bright red ground with a landscape in the middle, a rosewood tea-caddy, a pair of blown glass decanters, empty, a family Bible—the landlady's—a ragged copy of Byron's 'Don Juan,' and two odd duodecimo volumes of 'Tom Jones,' in brown calf—the lodger's.

Mrs. Stanmore lights a small paraffine lamp, takes off jacket and hat, and proceeds to prepare the evening meal. She has tea-things and tea-kettle to her hand in the roomy and mousey old closet beside the fireplace — such a closet as is only to be found in old houses, large enough for half a dozen burglars to hide in, or a whole nursery of children to play in, and with all manner of odd corners and shelves, and perchance an inner cupboard lurking mysteriously in its panelled recesses.

Mrs. Stanmore fills the kettle, and sets out the tea-things on the red japanned tray, and cuts a plate of bread and butter, and makes a round of toast deftly enough, though a year ago she was about the least handy of her sex in such small domestic offices. That stern schoolmistress, necessity, has taught her many things. How young she looks in the ruddy light of the fire, as she kneels on the hearth-rug toasting that round of bread for the poor meal that is to be dinner, tea, and supper, all in one for Mrs. Bonny's first-floor lodgers!—how young and how pretty! every feature so daintily fashioned, eyes so darkly lustrous, colouring so delicate; young, and with much need of love and sympathy, of comfort and careful tendance.

'And so uncle Stephen has really come home—richer than we ever made him in our dreams when we were children—and Marion is tasting all the pleasures his wealth can buy for her, Marion whom I pitied so when I left her behind me at Redcastle. She might pity me now, from the depth of her heart, if she could see me. She might have written to tell me the change in her fortunes—selfish thing. I suppose it is on account of my not answering her last two letters—such stupid letters as they were too—full of "I hope you are free from cold," and "I trust you are enjoying the nice autumn weather"—and Uncle Robert's rheumatic gout.'

She lapses into deeper meditation, looking into a red cavern in the heart of the fire, forgetful of the toast which hangs despondently upon the twopenny tin toasting-fork, shaped like Neptune's trident. Meditation full of rue, for she has done the most foolish thing a woman can do, except one, which is to repent too late of her folly; and she is fast coming to that ultimate stage of foolishness, vain regret for an irrevocable act.

She is still kneeling in front of the fire, absent-minded, absorbed, when the door opens, and a young man comes in, slowly, heavily, like one who brings no gladness with him, and has no hope of finding comfort at home. He comes quietly to the hearth, lays his hand upon Sibyl's shoulder, and addresses her not unkindly, but with little warmth in his tone.

'Well, little old woman, brooding over the fire as usual? What's the matter now?'

'Not much more than usual,' his wife answers, without looking up. 'You've had your customary luck, I suppose?' she inquires, after a pause, during which her husband has taken off his shabby overcoat, and flung himself into one of the arm-chairs.

'Yes, the wheel of fortune hasn't turned the other way yet. It revolves persistently, but always—like the planets—in the same direction. The immutable laws of bad luck are not to be abrogated in my favour. The fellows I wanted to see—butterfly friends of the past, who might lend me a fiver if I could catch them in the right humour—were all out. The situation I applied for has been given to somebody else. They had a hundred and thirty-nine applicants, the principal told me, and gave the berth to the applicant who dotted his i's with the nearest approach to mathematical precision. "We take a man's handwriting as the physical expression of his mental bias," said the principal, "and what we want is precision." Now you know I never dot my i's at all, or if I do the dot is so far from the letter as to make my meaning all the more unintelligible. So much for the clerkship. The commission agency we saw advertised turns out a "do." Agent required to put down fifty pounds as a guarantee of *bona fides*. I applied for an agency in the wine trade, offered to a young gentleman moving in good society and able to push a new brand of champagne; but when the wine merchant saw me, he asked, rather pertinently, if I moved in good society in this coat. I told him I was a gentleman by birth and education, and knew some of the best people in London. "Very likely, my dear sir," replies the grape-doctor, "but you don't visit them. We want young men who dress well, and look as if they could afford to drink the wine they recommend; men who have the appearance of wealth with the unscrupulousness of poverty." Rather neatly put by our friend the gooseberry-fermenter, wasn't it?'

'And you have done nothing, earned nothing, are no nearer earning anything than you were yesterday?' asks Sibyl, without lifting her eyes to his face.

Yet the time was, not a year ago, when to gaze upon that countenance seemed to her like reading a poem, when every turn of the handsome head, every sparkle of the dark eyes—eyes ever of uncertain hue but always dark—was a thing to remember and dream about;—when to watch him across a crowded room was quiet happiness, all-sufficing for an exacting love—when to hear his voice, gay or grave, was sweeter than music.

And now he sits a few paces from her, worn out, weary, dispirited, in sore need of comfort, and she cannot raise her eyes from moody contemplation of the fire. The difference is marked, the reason obvious. A year ago he was an undeclared lover—to-day he is an actual husband. Then there was not a many-petalled flower which did not suggest the question, 'Loves me, loves me not?' Now he has loved her and won her, and they have essayed to sail along the river of life together, and found the navigation difficult

—ay, hard and bitter as that weedy swamp through which Sir Samuel Baker's craft was toilfully dragged under Afric's torrid sky.

'You couldn't give a neater definition of my position,' replies Alex Secretan, otherwise Stanmore. He has striven to hide his destitution under an assumed name, just as his wife has kept the secret of an imprudent marriage by retaining a false address. Either mystery may be discovered at any moment, so various are the accidents of life.

'Don't consider me frivolous if I remind you that I haven't eaten anything since half-past eight this morning, and the perambulation of stony-hearted London is conducive to an inward craving. I won't call the feeling by so healthy a name as hunger. It's a compound sensation of sickness and emptiness. Is there anything to eat except bread and butter? It's a very nice thing in its way, but one comes to object to it on the same ground that Louis the Fourteenth's confessor took about partridges.'

'Mrs. Bonny is broiling a haddock,' replies Sibyl, listlessly.

'What good Catholics we are! keeping Advent all the week through. We had bloaters yesterday, and dried sprats the day before. All our days are Ember days.'

'Fish is the cheapest thing I can get, Alex.'

'No doubt, but it generally entails after expense in the way of an extra half-pint of beer. No matter. Let Mrs. Bonny bring forth the haddock,' exclaimed Alexis, applying himself diligently to the toast, which Sibyl has just buttered.

She tinkles the bell gently, as a polite hint to Mrs. Bonny. She dare not give a peremptory ring, as she might for a servant whose wages she paid. Mrs. Bonny—when letting her lodgings—professes to give attendance to her lodgers, but that attendance is scanty, and yielded as a favour rather than a right. A lodger who wants extra luxuries, such as onion sauce with a shoulder of mutton, or fried liver and bacon for supper, must make things very sweet to Mrs. Bonny. An order for the theatre, or even an occasional tumbler of grog, has a mollifying effect on her disposition, the loan of a newspaper soothes her sensitive mind. The Stanmores are too poor to offer even these small attentions, and are sometimes backward in the payment of their rent, and thus receive stinted service grudgingly given. Sibyl pours out the tea languidly, and with the air of a person out of health. She eats a little bread and butter, but without appetite, and when the haddock appears at last, borne by a slipshod girl, Mr. Stanmore has that fish all to himself, Sibyl refusing any portion thereof.

Alexis contemplates her pityingly—tenderly even ;—that haggard, sickly look in the delicate face touches him.

'Poor girl, how pale and ill you look! No appetite too. That's a bad sign. I wish I could have brought you home something more tempting than this old finnan. A bird, a sweetbread, or something of that kind.'

'I could not eat the most exquisite dinner that was ever cooked, Alex, so you needn't trouble yourself to regret that. But I do wish for something, very much.'

'What is it, darling? You ought to have every wish gratified just now. You would, if you had married a rich cheesemonger, or a wharfinger, or a packer, or a cotton-spinner, or a brass-founder, anything except that lowest animal in the scale of creation, a broken-down swell. What is it, Sibyl?'

'I want ten pounds, Alex,' she answers, intently, her elbow on the table, her chin supported by her hand, her eyes upon his face, attitude and expression alike earnest.

'Ten pounds, my dearest! We have been wanting ten pounds ever since our honeymoon.'

'Don't speak of our honeymoon,' exclaimed Sibyl, fretfully. 'It maddens me when I think how you squandered money that might have kept us in comfort for a year.'

'My love, you are so easily maddened,' remonstrates Alexis, placidly—he has never been seen out of temper. 'I dare say it was foolish to go the pace quite as fast as we did, but you had never seen Paris, and April in Paris with the woman one loves is the nearest approach that I can imagine to paradise.'

'You speak as if you had tried it often,' says Sibyl, with a sneer.

'Bah, child, a mere *façon de parler*. Do you remember our drives to the Cascade, in the balmy spring nights, when the stars were shining on the Bois, and how we used to sit in the lamp-lit gardens of the *café*, eating ices and making love? If ever we grow rich, Sibyl, we'll go back to Paris and have another honeymoon. But how about these ten pounds, little woman? What can you want with ten pounds?'

The young wife rises, glides behind her husband's chair, and, leaning on his shoulder, whispers something in his ear, a something at which he smiles tenderly, sadly, and turning in his chair, draws the young face—so wan and yet so fair—down to his lips.

'By Jove!' he exclaims, 'poor little woman, I am a brute, never to have thought of it. You want to buy clothes for the poor little beggar who is to make his first appearance upon the stage of life, before the innocent lambkins have begun to bleat in the meadows, undisputed heir to his father's impecuniosity. The lower animals have the advantage of us in that respect, by the by. The lambkins come into the world amply provided. You shall have the money, Sibyl. Yes, if I have to borrow, beg, rob for it. You shall have it somehow, even if

I were driven to beg of my bitterest foe, ay, of Stephen Trenchard himself.'

His arm is round her and he feels her start at the name.

'Don't be frightened, little woman. That's only a figure of speech. I never saw Stephen Trenchard in my life, and as to begging of him, there's nothing more unlikely, since he is, to the best of my knowledge, an inhabitant of the city of palaces, otherwise Calcutta.'

'He might have come back to England, Alex, without your knowing anything about it,' suggests Sibyl.

'Ay, that might he have done easily, child, seeing that he is a very insignificant person in this big busy world, and that I know nothing whatever about him, except that he did me deadly wrong before I was born.'

'And you were taught to hate him?'

'Yes verily, before I learned my catechism I learned to hate Stephen Trenchard with a righteous and a godly hate, for was he not the falsest and meanest of men? and the Scripture does not forbid us to hate falsehood and meanness. If Eve had hated the serpent a little, humanity in general would not have gone wrong. Trenchard was like the serpent, a creature that crawled, a wriggling worm in the guise of a man. He wriggled and wormed himself into the fortune that should have been my father's; he wriggled and wormed himself into the heart of my father's first love; and he did all this wrong,—deliberate wrong, mark you, basely conceived, the study of his days and nights, with a smiling face, clasping his victim's hand in friendship all the while, so that no thunderbolt falling from the skies could have surprised my father more than the discovery that his arch enemy was *there*, hiding under the mask of his humble friend.'

Alexis has risen, and paces the room, fired by this memory of a lesson learned in earliest boyhood. As deeply as he loved his dead father, so deeply does he hate his father's enemy and betrayer. Sibyl watches him, thoughtful and perplexed. Of all things difficult to impossibility, nothing could seem more so than to reconcile her love and duty to her husband, and her desire to win her uncle's fortune.

CHAPTER II.

'O WORLD, THY SLIPPERY TURNS!'

GIVEN a ten-pound note which must be had. Query, where to get it? A problem not over-easy of solution for a man who has exhausted the generosity of those few friends who are generous, and discovered the hollowness of those numerous acquaintances who, not ill-natured in the beaten way of friendship, will do anything for a friend except open their purse-strings.

A sharp December morning. The wind has changed in the night from south-west to due east, and there has been a light fall of snow, which is whitening the various and picturesque roofs of Chelsea, and hangs on the ragged elm branches on Cheyne Walk. The river is dun colour, the sky iron-gray, as if the atmosphere were heavily charged with snow. Butchers' boys, cabmen, and those denizens of the street who seem to get through their daily round of labour with an ample margin of leisure for gossip and standing about at corners, look up at the darkened vault of heaven and opine that there will be a heavy fall of snow before night.

This is the cold world which Alexis Secretan faces, leaving his wife asleep in the old tent bed at number eleven, Dixon Street. She has fallen into slothful habits of late, pleading as her excuse that there is so little to get up for, now-a-days. Certainly not pleasure or prosperity, not even so much as a new book to read, for does not that ragged old 'Don Juan,' whose bitterest verses Alexis gloats over in his gloomiest moods, constitute, with graceless 'Tom Jones,' the entire stock of literature in Sibyl Secretan's reach?

Ten pounds. He faces the bitter blast blowing up the river from Plumstead and Woolwich and all the chilly eastern marshes, and seeming to concentrate its biting power upon innocent Cheyne Walk, he faces the rasping wind moodily, puzzling out this insolvable problem, where to get ten pounds! Where to get it? that is the only question. The how to get it has been settled from the beginning. He must borrow it. He has almost outgrown the sense of degradation which accompanies the earlier stages of the borrower's piteous career,—he has almost reached the lower depth of the hardy and habitual borrower. He has but to settle with himself upon whom he shall make his demand. For himself he might perchance never have stooped to borrow. He would have emigrated rather, and lived by the sweat of his brow in some new country where men are equal, and poverty less than a crime; or, his heart failing him, he might have flung himself and his difficulties off Waterloo Bridge, and so made an easy end of them; but with a young and beloved wife dependent on him for daily bread he has sacrificed pride and independence, manhood and honesty even, he sometimes thinks, and for the last six months has lived a wretched hand-to-mouth existence, trying to get employment all the time, and occasionally earning a fortuitous five-pound note, but supporting the burden of life for the most part by the aid of loans obtained from the associates of happier days. He is not a man upon whom so pitiful a position sits lightly; though—being gifted by nature with a peculiarly sweet and easy temper—he has a way of taking his troubles placidly, especially in the presence of his wife, and his railings at Fate and Fortune, though frequent, are philosophical rather than angry or vindictive. He is a man who, if Nature's bounties are to be counted as a heritage, is not undowered. Eminently handsome, of a noble presence, athletic, with a constitution to which illness and disease are unknown—with a voice that can soothe or charm, threaten or command—an eye that dominates man and the lesser animals alike—a quick, bright intellect—a wondrous power of endurance—that noble quality which in a horse we call 'stay,' which in man is perhaps the crowning characteristic of manhood,—with such gifts as these, Alexis Secretan should hardly count himself ill furnished for the battle of life. Unhappily, the old fairy story of the Princess's christening gifts repeats itself more or less in every man's life. Among the numerous good fairies who were invisible guests at Alexis Secretan's baptismal feast two evil fairies slipped in unawares. These were Poverty and Unthrift.

'He shall have little of this world's goods,' said the first.

'And he shall squander that little,' added the second.

This baptismal curse has been fulfilled. The only son of a disinherited father, Alexis has yet escaped the chastening influence of that sharp schoolmaster, Poverty. His mother's fortune was enough to support father and son in luxurious idleness, and in a happy-go-lucky, easy kind of life in foreign cities, where life is cheaper, gayer, and brighter than at home. At seventeen his father's influence was sufficient to obtain him a commission in a crack regiment. Father and mother died within a year of each other, and soon after Alexis had put on his epaulettes. The remnant of his mother's fortune—the bulk thereof having been anticipated, and made away with from year to year as necessity impelled—served to keep the young man going in an expensive profession for about five years, during which he had the good fortune to see some active service, distinguish himself by various displays of reckless daring, and obtain a captaincy.

At the end of the fifth year he had spent the last shilling of his capital, and was in debt. Knowing the impossibility of living on his pay, he sold out, and for some time—about a year and a half—contrived to live upon the proceeds of his commission, having thus sacrificed his military career to the necessities of eighteen months' idleness, and to that miserable condition of a noble profession which makes it impossible that a gentleman should live by his sword.

Alexis reviews the ranks of his acquaintances as he walks Londonwards. He has exhausted the bounty of his easy-going, and, in some cases, open-handed brother officers. No hope of help there. His foreign education has left him without school friends near at hand. Honest Max, or jovial Fritz of Heidelberg might advance him a thaler—or a handful of groschen—were they within reach, but their normal state is impecuniosity.

There is but one source left undrained. Even in this depth of destitution he has not yet appealed to his mother's sole surviving sister, his aunt Louisa, co-heiress with his mother of a rich

Manchester manufacturer, and more fortunately married than his mother. Aunt Louisa is the wife of Dudley Gorsuch, barrister, in large practice, and member for Glaseford, in the Potteries, a self-made man, self-important, and worshipping rank and mammon, as the Ammonites worshipped Moloch. On this bleak December morning it occurs to Alexis that aunt Louisa, being of his mother's kin, must have some green spot in her nature, some place in her heart accessible to softer feeling, were it but the size of a pin's point, and that he, her nephew, destitute and forlorn, ought to be able to find that place.

He has dined at her house when he was a dashing young officer, well dressed, well surrounded; has been entertained bounteously by her, made much of, presented to her friends with some touch of pride, being verily a young man for women to be proud of in his prosperous days. At that happier time aunt Louisa appeared to him worldly, but good-natured, hospitable, benevolent even.

He is at the bottom of Grosvenor Place by this time, and has made up his mind to try aunt Louisa.

Mr. and Mrs. Gorsuch live in a street out of Grosvenor Place, too expensive a street for Mr. Gorsuch's means, which are larger in appearance than reality; but a fine house in a fine neighbourhood is a standing evidence of wealth, and as such is worth all it costs. There are so many things in which prudent careful people can save money; notably in their meals and the food they give their servants, since these matters appertain to the inner economy of a household, and are secrets to the outer world. Mrs. Gorsuch pinches in all domestic details, even down to scouring-paper. Mr. Gorsuch gives three state dinners in the season, supplied by Gunter, banquets of imposing appearance, but washed down with wines that range from half a crown to four and sixpence per bottle.

Alexis, fully aware of his broken-down appearance, is too wise to put forward his relationship as a claim to be admitted, despite the footman's suspicious look.

He simply asks to see Mrs. Gorsuch, but he gives his real name, Mr. Secretan.

He is left in the hall while the footman communicates with his mistress, whose voice is heard in the library at the back of the hall.

'She can hardly deny herself when I can hear her talking,' thinks Alexis.

She does not deny herself. The man ushers him into the library—a square apartment with a gloomy outlook, and two pompous bookcases, containing law books, and a few of those classic authors whose works are more largely bought than read.

A fire burns frostily and cheerily in the bright steel grate. Mrs. Gorsuch sits at the table, with a row of tradesmen's books and a ponderous plated inkstand before her. She has been trying to reconcile discrepancies between the butcher's account of meat delivered and her own idea of the meat that ought to have been consumed. Three pounds of rump steak sit heavily upon her soul. She cannot see how those three pounds of butcher's meat can have been honestly eaten, and she is haunted by the image of an all-devouring policeman—or those bloodsuckers, the cook's relatives.

She is a little dried-up looking woman, with stiff bands of light auburn hair, pepper-castored with gray; a brown merino gown, a pinched-looking lace cap, and a double eye-glass attached to a chain which glitters in the rosy light of the fire, as she turns to look at her visitor, glass in hand.

'Alex!' she exclaims, 'Good heavens, what a change!'

She saw him last as a guest at one of her state dinners, elegant, prosperous-looking, with the easy self-assured air of a man certain of success in life. She sees him now reduced to the lowest ebb in the tide of man's existence. He comes to her as a beggar. Mendicancy is written on his face.

'Yes, there's a marked decadence from the young man about town, is there not?' he replies. 'You see the brand which Destitution stamps upon her children. I have fallen very low in the world since I used to come to your swell parties. You were very kind to me in those days, aunt,'—Mrs. Gorsuch winces, knowing so well what is coming,—'so kind that I have made up my mind to sue for a small kindness to-day. It goes against the grain, but——"

'Before we talk about kindnesses, Alexis, perhaps you will be good enough to explain how you have sunk to this absolutely disreputable condition?' asked Mrs. Gorsuch, looking at her nephew's boots.

'The easiest thing in the world,' answers Alexis, with agreeable recklessness. 'I have spent all my money, and have not yet acquired the knack of earning more.'

He sees, dimly, that there is little to be hoped from this flesh and blood of his, and that placid despair which is his normal condition enables him to take things easily.

'Earning!' echoes aunt Louisa, with a bitter sneer. 'It isn't in any of your race to earn the bread they eat. My father made his fortune by honest industry, your father thought he honoured our family when he exchanged his landless gentility for my sister's thirty thousand pounds. Poor Maud! it was a luckless day that brought him across her path.'

'Reserve your pity, aunt Louisa. My mother's married life was a happy one. I can bear witness to that.'

'Happy!' exclaims Mrs. Gorsuch, contemptuously. 'Was she in society?'

This question she evidently considers unanswerable. Alexis respects her opinion, and makes no reply.

'Can you compare her position with mine?'

'Certainly not. You have a handsome house in a fashionable street, a bishop for your right-hand neighbour, an earl on your left hand. You have the orthodox establishment of a lady, and all the cares that accompany it. My mother lived a roving life in some of the loveliest places of this earth, and had no servant but the maid who waited on her when she was well and nursed her when she was ill, and loved her dearly always. My mother's society consisted of the few friends who were faithful to her through all changes of fortune. Those do not count, of course. No, she was not in society; but perhaps when you and she compare notes as to your earthly experiences in a wiser world you may find that the balance has been more evenly adjusted than you suppose now.'

Mrs. Gorsuch has hardly heard him. Her mind is troubled by a grave doubt.

'I hope you did not tell the butler that you are my nephew,' she says, anxiously.

'I had too much discretion for that. And now, aunt, not wishing to intrude myself or my boots (he has perceived her uneasy glances at those patched offenders against the decencies of life) upon you longer than is absolutely necessary, I will come to the point. Will you lend me, or give me, ten pounds? If Fate is against me you may call it a gift, but if Fortune favour me it shall be repaid tenfold. I needn't tell you how badly I want money. My appearance testifies to my necessities, but it is not for myself that I am a beggar. It is for my wife, soon to become a mother.'

'What?' almost shrieks Mrs. Gorsuch. 'Married! Without income or profession, you have linked yourself to some unhappy creature?'

'Yes, we have taken the liberty to unite our destitution. If the worst comes to the worst the same pan of charcoal that serves for one will accommodate the other.'

'Your impiety shocks but does not surprise me,' says Mrs. Gorsuch. 'Such sinful imprudence could hardly be found in a man of religious principles.'

'No, prudence and piety generally go in double harness. Well, aunt, I have my answer. You won't lend or give me the money?'

'In the first place, I have not such a sum to lend. Mr. Gorsuch's position demands the expenditure of our income. We are never in debt,' with a shudder, 'but we have never anything to spare. I had to strain every nerve in order to pay our annual contribution to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.'

'And you have nothing left for a starving nephew at home.'

'Even if I were in a position to advance you this money—which I repeat I am not—I cannot see that your condition would be materally improved by the loan. Where would you be when the money was spent?'

'Exactly where I am now. The money is not for myself, but for my wife. I should not touch a sixpence of it.'

'Who was this unfortunate young woman when you married her?'

'Will you lend me ten pounds?' asks Alexis, ignoring the question.

'Sadly to be pitied, poor creature, whoever she was. Some young person of inferior position, I dare say.'

'Will you lend me ten pounds?'

'I have already told you that I have no such sum at my disposal, Alexis,' replies Mrs. Gorsuch. And then, hesitatingly, reluctantly extracting a coin from a plethoric-looking Russia leather purse, she adds, 'If half a sovereign will be of some small assistance——'

'It won't,' answered her nephew, abruptly. 'I dare say I could make as much in a day by sweeping a crossing, and I shouldn't feel myself so degraded as if I took the money from you. Good-bye, aunt.'

'He has opened the door before he concludes, and Aunt Louisa endures agonies for the rest of the day, fearful that the butler, or man of all work, heard that last address. Remorse for her treatment of her nephew troubles her not at all.

'He cannot say that I sent him away empty-handed,' she reflects. 'I offered him half a sovereign.'

CHAPTER III.

THE TRUE METAL.

Alexis Secretan turns his back upon the solemn responsibilites of Tubal Street, Grosvenor Place, sick with anger and despair. He is angry with himself rather than with his aunt. He loathes himself for having invited such humiliation.

'I ought to have known her better,' he muses. 'A woman who gives showy dinners and cheap wines, and talks of her friend the Duchess of Landsend, or the Countess of John-o'-Groat; a woman whose name appears in the subscription list of all the orthodox charities, just under the nobility, and who never keeps a servant six months. And yet she is my mother's sister, of the same race; my mother, whose nature was all kindness, and with whom to give was as natural as to breathe.'

He stands at Hyde Park Corner, indifferent to the east wind and the falling snow,—fine small snow-flakes that lie unmelted where they fall.

'Now which way shall I turn myself in search of a friendly soul?' he asks.

He turns south-westward, perhaps to escape that biting easterly blast, and walks towards Brompton, listlessly, hopelessly, walking fast to keep himself warm, but with no settled purpose.

Past the Bell and Horns Tavern he stops and looks up at one of the houses in the high road, a house with a front garden—or railed enclosure, which courtesy calls garden—a snowy parallelogram, in which flourish four melancholy bushes, like dwarf cypresses in a graveyard. The house is neat and bright-looking, and a bill in the parlour window announces that apartments are to be let within.

Alexis opens the gate as if familiar with its structure, goes up to the door hesitatingly, knocks, and asks to see Mr. Plowden. He is ushered forthwith into the back parlour, where a man of about his own age, pale and thoughtful-looking, sits by an indifferent fire painting a map. A pile of unpainted maps, a battered old tin paint-box and brushes lie on the table before him. The thin white hand travels dexterously, rapidly over the paper, leaving a delicate line of colour behind it.

The map-painter looks up at Alexis, brush in hand, surveys him from head to foot, wonderingly, and drops the brush full of colour, on the map.

'Captain Secretan!' he exclaims, 'Is it possible?'

'It's true, at any rate,' answers Alexis, holding out his hand, which the other grasps affectionately. 'Theoretically impossible, perhaps, but absolutely true. Just wash off that splash of cobalt, Dick. I shouldn't like you to spoil one of your maps on my account.'

'I'm so glad to see you,' says Richard Plowden, dabbing the map with a sponge rather nervously. 'I was afraid you'd quite forgotten me, and that we should never see you here again, either as a lodger or a friend. However, here you are, and I'm heartily glad to see you,' poking the dingy little fire vigorously, and then holding out his hand again to Alexis; 'but I'm afraid things haven't been going so well with you as they ought. You look——'

'Poor,' interjects Alexis. 'You're not far out. Poverty and small-pox are unmistakable diseases. You can see them in a man's face. Before you say another kind word to me, Dick, I must tell you the truth—the naked, unpleasant truth. I come to you as a beggar. Knowing how hard you work for every shilling you earn—knowing what a good fellow you are—good son, good friend, good Christian—I am mean enough to come here and ask you to help me. The worthless drone appeals to the honest, independent bee.'

'So far as I can help you,' replies Mr. Plowden, with undiminished kindliness, 'I am at your service. You were a profitable lodger to my mother, and a kind friend to me. It isn't many gentlemen in your position who would have condescended to associate with a lame invalid, who gets his living by painting maps. I know those evenings when you used to come and smoke your pipe down here were some of the happiest in my life.'

He walks about the room as he speaks, drags a chair to the fireside for Alexis, takes a loaf of bread, a bottle of anchovies, a pat of butter, and a bottle of ginger wine out of the chiffonier, spreads a napkin, and arranges this temperate refreshment on one side of the table, pushing his maps and colour-box to the other. He walks lame, but is active and hardy notwithstanding.

'Do you suppose I should have spent many evenings with you if I had not found your company pleasant, Dick?' says Alexis, lightly. 'I found that you had read more and thought more than any fellow of my acquaintance, and it was refreshing to me to hear your ideas upon all manner of subjects. And then I flattered myself that you liked me, and were pleased with my talk of the gay world; above all, about that stage you love so well and see so little of. Do you remember how we used to discuss the actors of the day, Dick, and settle how Shakespeare ought to be interpreted?'

'Do you think I can ever forget?' asks Richard Plowden. 'I've not so many friends that I can afford to forget the one who was the first to tell me

I had a mind. Do you know, Captain Secretan, that I've had the impertinence to write a book since then? Do peg into those anchovies, captain, and don't mind cutting the knobs off the loaf. I like crumb as well as crust.'

'A book, Dick. An essay on the genius of Shakespeare!'

'Nothing so ambitious, or so unlikely to sell. A geography for schools, on a new system. It is not published yet, but I have reason to believe that it will be, and that I shall make a little money by it. So you may have less compunction in borrowing a pound or two.'

'Dear old Dick!' exclaims Alexis, who has been doing ample justice to the anchovies and bread and butter, and warming himself with a glass of ginger wine. 'Unhappily, it is not a question of a pound or two. I want ten pounds.'

Richard Plowden's countenance falls. It is not that he would measure his friendship, but ten pounds is an awful sum.

'If I ever can repay it I will, and with interest at a more than usurious rate. But it is almost a mockery to talk of repayment in my present condition.'

Richard limps to the chiffonier without a word, takes out a little japanned cash-box, unlocks it, and extracts therefrom a five-pound note and five sovereigns.

'I had the money ready for the Christmas rent,' he says, 'but you are welcome to it. We shall be able to rub along without it, I dare say.'

What pinching and deprivation this rubbing along process will cost, Alexis can pretty well guess, for he has seen how the widow Plowden and her son live at the best of times.

He takes the money with a faltering hand, and turns away his face to hide the tears that disfigure it, the first that he has shed since he wept for his mother's death.

Presently he grows cheerful again, resumes his seat, finishes his luncheon, and then tells Richard Plowden the story of his decadence, an unvarnished tale which his humble friend hears with deepest interest.

'If you could put me in the way of earning a few shillings a week by any kind of labour, however humble, you would be doing me even a greater favour than you have done me this day; and yet, knowing your circumstances as I do, I feel as if you had given me ten years of your life instead of ten pounds.'

Richard Plowden promises that he will turn the matter over in his mind, and see what he can do, and so the two young men part, as firm friends as in the days when Mrs. Plowden's first-floor lodger, the dashing young captain, was the object of her son's affectionate admiration, his ideal of all that is noble and splendid in manhood.

CHAPTER IV.

'HAD THE CHANCE BEEN WITH US THAT HAS NOT BEEN.'

ALEXIS speeds homeward joyously, elate as if he had conquered fortune. He has borrowed money from a social inferior, and yet does not feel humiliated. That interview with Richard Plowden has cheered him wondrously. The patient, gentle soul working at monotonous task-work in a gloomy back parlour, with no outlook save blank wall and cistern, working uncomplainingly, nay, even cheerfully, has read him a lesson. There must be work for a strong, healthy fellow like himself when a cripple in a back room can earn his living. Alexis begins to think he has tried life at the wrong end, that in striving for some shabby-genteel, reduced-gentleman's occupation, he has overlooked those lowlier and less sophisticated avocations which offer themselves to every honest man.

'We'll emigrate as soon as the little woman is strong enough for a sea voyage,' he tells himself, 'and I'll turn shepherd on the Australian downs.'

Sibyl receives him with an eager look, full of questioning. She is sitting on the hearth-rug as he comes into the room, in her favourite attitude, looking into the fire, her ruffled hair golden in the ruddy light, her eyes heavy with thought or care.

His elated aspect tells her that he has been successful. She rises and runs to him, trembling with anxiety.

'Have you got the money?'

'Yes, Sibyl. Of all my friends, the one who could least afford to lose it was the only one to lend it. Here it is, little one. You must make it go a long way, for it has cost me sore humiliation.'

'It was lent grudgingly, then?'

'No; but it was refused heartlessly by the wrong person before I hit upon the right one. Make the most of it, my love, now you've got it.'

His wife takes the little parcel of money from his hand, slowly, looking downward, and without a word.

'You are pleased, little woman?'

'It was very good of you to try so hard,' she answers in a low voice.

She begins to busy herself about her husband's dinner without another word. This evening she gives him half a pound of rump-steak, an unwonted feast, at which his soul rejoices.

'I am faring sumptuously to-day,' he says, as she sits opposite to him, pouring out the tea with a listless, absent air, which he takes for physical languor. 'I have had a superb luncheon already.'

All that evening Sibyl is unwontedly silent, and Alexis, not caring to describe his interview with Mrs. Gorsuch, has not much to tell her after he has related Richard Plowden's generosity. He has recourse to the tattered leaves of 'Don Juan,' and sits sniggering over his favourite passages, and feeling as if he and the poet were both outside the human race generally, and could afford to ridicule and despise it.

He sallies forth early next morning, despite the snow, which now clothes the land as a garment, and goes straight to Brompton, to have another cheery talk with Dick Plowden, and to inquire whether that back parlour philosopher has hit upon any method by which he, Alexis, may earn his daily bread.

Richard is hopeful. He has an uncle engaged in a large shipping agent's office, an uncle who would have obtained employment for Richard himself, had Richard's legs been more serviceable in active life. To this uncle, Mr. Sampson Plowden, Dick writes a long letter, setting forth his friend's capacities and desire for employment; and, armed with this recommendation, Alexis speeds to the offices of Messrs. Keel and Skrew, in a narrow alley out of Fenchurch Street. He sees Sampson Plowden, an active little elderly man, who asks him if he can write a good hand, and if he is quick at accounts. Alexis asks for a sheet of paper, and writes a few lines in a clerk-like hand, taking care to dot his i's this time, and then volunteers to solve any arithmetical puzzle that Mr. Plowden likes to set him.

'Well, I'll take your word and Dick's as to the book-keeping,' replies Mr. Plowden. 'We employ a good many clerks, and sometimes have to send one to Australia, which makes a vacancy. The next time this occurs you shall hear of it. The junior clerks are in my department, and it's in my province to engage or dismiss them. I'll bear you in mind, Mr. Stanmore.'

'If you could send me to Australia,' hazards Alexis, glowing with hope, 'it would suit me admirably.'

'Well, well, that would be a matter involving much consideration. However, you shall hear from me at the first opportunity.'

This is not much, but it is something; for Mr. Plowden looks like a man who means what he says, and Dick has given him a high character for integrity and kindness of heart. Alexis plods homewards, cheered and sustained by sorrow's pole-star, Hope.

He lets himself in at number eleven, Dixon Street, the door being on the latch, and goes upstairs, prepared to find Sibyl in a brighter frame of mind than usual, busy at her needlework most likely, the lamp burning, the hearth swept, the evening meal set out, with neatness which lends its charm even to poverty.

The room looks curiously blank and dreary as he enters it. The fire has gone out; cheerless sight, with that white world outside, and the thermometer below freezing-point. There is no tea-tray, no white cloth on the table, no lamp burning. The dusk is just light enough to show him that the room is empty, and that no preparation has been made for his refreshment.

He goes back to the landing and calls over the balusters to his landlady: 'Has my wife been out long, Mrs. Bonny?'

'She went out just before dinner-time,' screams a voice from below.

Dinner-time with Mrs. Bonny means one o'clock.

'She has gone to buy things, I dare say,' thinks Alexis, 'gone to London most likely. She ought to have been home by half-past four, though, if she went as early as one. Did she leave any message, Mrs. Bonny?' he asks, calling over the balusters again.

'No,' replies the landlady, curtly, 'she didn't leave no message, but she took a carpet bag.'

'A carpet bag,' repeats Alexis, with a puzzled air, as he goes back to the blank, cold room. 'What could she want with a carpet bag? To bring the things home, perhaps,—foolish little thing! As if a parcel wasn't lighter to carry than a carpet bag.'

He gropes for wood and coals in the bottom of the roomy cupboard, and lights a fire, patiently, toilfully, not unskilfully, with hands which have learned many offices unknown to the elegant Captain Secretan.

He is dispirited by his wife's absence, but not angry. That placid, easy temper of his is full of tenderness and indulgence for the 'little woman' whose brief married life has been so full of care, who approaches the mystery of maternity under such sorrowful conditions. He lights his fire, brings out a loaf, a starveling slice of cheese, and some small-beer in a bottle, and sits by the hearth to eat his meal in the firelight. As he eats and drinks his eyes wander thoughtfully round the firelit room, jets of flame flashing and twinkling on the wainscot.

'Not a bad old room by any means,' he thinks, 'if one had just enough money to live in it comfortably?'

He fancies that in Sampson Plowden's friendship he has found the clue that shall extricate him from the maze of adversity. How happy Sibyl and he might be in this humble old room were he but employed as clerk at Messrs. Keel and Skrew's with a salary of say thirty shillings a week! Not an ambitious desire, surely, in a young man whose family history is set forth with some flourish in Burke's 'Landed Gentry.'

'I shall have something pleasant to tell the little woman when she comes home, at any rate,' thinks Alexis, as he sips the flat fourpenny ale, put carefully away after last night's supper.

A pert little flame spurts out of a knob of coal just at this moment, brightening the whole room, and Secretan's eye, wandering idly as he muses, is attracted by a spot of white upon the sideboard.

'A letter, by Jove!' he exclaims. 'Who the deuce can have written to me, when not a mortal knows my address?'

He rises—listlessly—apprehending no advantage from the letter, lights the lamp, and goes over to the sideboard. The letter is from his wife.

'Dear Alexis,

'Our misery of the last few months has opened my eyes to the sad truth that it would have been far better for both of us had we never met, or had we been wise enough to defer our marriage till we had some settled means of living. What am I but a burden to you? How many situations there are in which you could get your living were you alone and unfettered! while I could at least return to the dull drudgery of teaching, and escape the pinch of absolute poverty. Do not think me cold-hearted, dear Alexis, when I tell you that I am weary of our continual struggle, and that I have resolved to end it by an act which may provoke your indignation, but which, I feel assured, will result in your advantage. I set you free from the burden of a wife whom you have found it too bitter a task to support. You have rarely uttered a complaint, but I have seen despair in your face often enough to learn that it has settled in your heart. Without me you may begin the world afresh. Apart from you I shall have opportunities of prosperity as Miss Faunthorpe, which I could never have as Mrs. Secretan. If my lot changes, and fortune smiles, as I dare to hope it will, you shall hear of me; and even if you blame me for a separation which your anger may call a desertion, believe at least that in severance, as in union, I shall be ever your true and loyal wife,

'SIBYL.'

Alexis reads and re-reads this letter like a man who hast lost the power of understanding his mother tongue, and pores over familiar words as though they were the hieroglyphics of an Assyrian inscription.

So cold, so heartless, so deliberate. His heart sickens at the thought of such cruelty. In all his adversity, with starvation staring him in the face, he has thought of his wife as part of himself; has never considered the responsibility of providing for her as doubling the difficulty of existence; has never for a moment remembered that life might be easier to him without her. He has been sorry for her, has thought of her deprivations, her endurance, but of the burden upon himself—never. All hopes and dreams of a happier future have centred themselves in her. To win a brighter home for her, to surround her with comfort, has been his one ambition. Reckless as his marriage was, he has never repented it. Fettered hand and foot as he has found himself by that ill-considered act, he has never wished the tie loosened.

He stands with the letter in his hand, repeating the words to himself incredulously. It must be a jest—a trick to test his love—anything but the base and bitter truth.

He puts the letter in his pocket at last, goes downstairs, and penetrates the sacred domain of Mrs. Bonny; namely, the front kitchen, which is at once the parlour or living-room, where Mr. Bonny, employed as a railway porter, tastes the sweets of domestic leisure, and the apartment in which Mrs. Bonny cooks for her lodgers. The back kitchen makes a cheerful bedroom, and in summer-time, when Mr. Bonny trains scarlet runners over the window, enjoys a rustic outlook.

Alexis is received somewhat coldly by Mrs. Bonny, that lady being intent upon frying sausages for the railway porter's evening repast, and resenting all intrusion upon her private domain on principle. He questions her closely as to the mode and manner of his wife's departure, but she can tell him no more than she has told him already. Mrs. Stanmore went out between twelve and one o'clock, carrying a small carpet bag.

'I shouldn't have known anything about it if I hadn't happened to meet her as I was fetching of the dinner beer, our Mary Ann being washing, and no one else to fetch it.'

'Did she say nothing to you?'

'Not a word; she just gives me a nod, in her off-hand way, and walks on.'

That is all. Alexis goes upstairs again, heavily, slowly, and paces the deserted room. By-and-by he pauses before a rickety old chest of drawers with brass handles and locks, opens a drawer, and finds it empty. It is the drawer that contained his wife’s poor remains of a wardrobe that had never been richly furnished, a few under garments, a collar or two, and so on. These she has evidently taken with her. Nothing could have been more deliberate than her departure.

Presently a curious idea occurs to him, improbable, but it takes a strong hold upon him nevertheless.

Has she gone to make away with herself? and is this heartless letter of hers a tender device to save him the pain of knowing that she had been driven by despair to suicide?

This seems to him more likely, more natural than that the wife he loves can desert him; can, with coldest calculation, barter love and truth against the chances of prosperity.

What those chances are he knows not. He is so ignorant of his wife’s family and surroundings as not to know that Sibyl Faunthorpe is the niece of Stephen Trenchard.

Why he is thus unenlightened is a question that can be only answered by a retrospect, and will be best answered in Sibyl’s own words.

CHAPTER V.

SIBYL FAUNTHORPE'S DIARY.

Lowther Street, November 14, 186–. I suppose to keep a diary is about as foolish a thing as any one can do—waste of time in the present, and self-abasement in the future. I dare say I shall hate myself when I read over these pages in years to come, and see what a stupid creature I was at nineteen years of age. However, I am driven to scribble about myself and my feelings for want of anything better to do in the long, lonely evenings, when the children are gone to bed, and Mrs. Hazleton is out, and I have the dreary schoolroom all to myself. I used to read any novel I could find lying about downstairs, and bring up here for an evening, till Mrs. Hazleton found me out and forbade it. 'Novels, my dear Miss Faunthorpe,' she preached, 'are the worst possible reading for a young woman in your position—enervating the mind, weakening the logical faculty, which in your brain I regret to say is sorely deficient.' I felt inclined to ask her why she reads novels if they are so injurious. She has a knack of reading one's thoughts, and answered my objection before I could give it expression. 'For the head of a household, who must always have some portion of care and anxiety, novel-reading is an innocent relaxation; but the instructor of youth should employ her leisure in widening her circle of knowledge. The books in the study bookcase are quite at your service, Miss Faunthorpe, whenever you like to avail yourself of them,' and then she sailed out of the room to go to a dinner party, dressed in maroon velvet and old Brussels lace, and looking very handsome—for an old woman. She must be five-and-forty at the least.

Perhaps I ought not to complain of my bondage, for I might be worse off than I am. Mrs. Hazleton is fond of preaching, but she is not unkind to me. She has no grown-up daughters, and whenever she has company I am asked down to the drawing-room to play and sing and make myself generally useful;

and as she has a good deal of company, this happens tolerably often. Luckily, music is my strong point. When Mrs. Hazleton is in a good humour she takes me for a drive in the park, and I see the world and hear what is going on. I go to a fashionable church with the children on Sundays and Saints' days, and am altogether much better off than in my uncle Robert's poverty-stricken household, in dull old Redcastle, where I knew no one worth knowing, and where life is only another name for vegetation. I am sure the cabbages in uncle's wretched kitchen-garden had quite as much enjoyment of life as Marion and I—more indeed, for they had sunshine and perpetual idleness, and bees and butterflies buzzing and skimming about them, while we had old house-linen to patch and darn, and the tradesmen's books to puzzle over, and Jenny to teach, and mend for, and scold, and puddings to make, and buttons to sew on from January to December. I think there never was such a man as uncle Robert for wrenching the buttons off his shirts, and pushing his toes through his socks.

So, at the worst, though I have to grind French, Italian, and German verbs in a mill all the week through, and listen to those wretched children strumming Kalkbrenner's exercises three hours a day, I am better off than Marion. I have forty pounds a year to spend upon clothes, and I see a great many nice people. Mrs. Hazleton boasts that she only knows the best people. 'I am no tuft-hunter, my dear,' she tells me when she is in one of her expansive moods. 'You will see very few titles in my card-basket; but the people I know belong to some of the best families in England.'

December 3.—Such a tiresome, dreary week. Mrs. Hazleton has dined out four evenings out of six, and now on the fifth she has taken off the children to see the new actor at the Haymarket. 'I am sorry there won't be room for you in the box, Miss Faunthorpe,' she said, with her chilly politeness, after I had been toiling for an hour helping Moyson, the children's maid, to tie Lucinda's ribbons, and brush Laura's hair, and sew on a tucker for Magdalen. So here I am at half-past seven o'clock, my hearth swept, and my fire made up, as solitary as an old maid with a small annuity.

I have been down to the study, and chosen a couple of volumes, the best I could find in a dry-as-dust collection of antiquities—the 'Citizen of the World' and a volume of the *Spectator*,—but I don't feel equal to reading either. It suits my present humour better to scribble my complaints against fortune in this ridiculous book of mine. What a lucky woman Mrs. Hazleton is! Married to a wealthy Indian judge, and left a widow six years ago with an ample fortune; too old to care about marrying again, but not too old to be admired and made much of by her friends; her children young enough to be kept in the schoolroom for the next four years. Impossible to imagine a more independent position. What a contrast between her fate and mine! I have never known what it is to have my own way, and yet, when I was a child, I thought I had only to be 'grown up' in order to taste all the sweets of life. Perhaps that was because of the nonsense people talked about my good looks. I can fancy no greater misfortune for a girl in my position than to be brought up with the idea of being a beauty. When I was a little thing people were always drawing comparisons between Marion and me to Marion's disadvantage; and before I was twelve I knew quite well that I was the pretty Miss Faunthorpe. Even old Hester, who never had a civil word for me at the best of times, used to feed my vanity with her taunts about my pretty face and my uselessness. 'Handsome is that handsome does,' she used to say, by which I knew very well that she thought me handsome. Then came school, and I was set up as a beauty, and courted and petted by one-half of the girls, and detested by the other half, and nagged at by Marion, who was set against me by the disagreeable comparisons people were always making between us. What was the consequence of all this? I grew up with the idea that as soon as I left school, some rich young man, handsome and agreeable into the bargain, would fall in love with me at first sight, and that I should be married in grand style at the parish church—six bridesmaids and ever so many carriages and pairs—before the admiring eyes of all

Redcastle. I came home to uncle Robert's dull red house, prepared for conquest. Life would be like a fairy tale. Some fine summer morning the handsome young prince would appear, and I should be raised at once from Cinderella's obscurity to Cinderella's high fortune. Foolish creature that I was! I used to lie awake at night telling Marion the grand things I would do for her when I was married.

'Where is the prince to come from, Sib?' she asked me once, rather maliciously. 'You know there are not above three such young men in Redcastle—young Taylor, the lawyer's son; Mr. Lacy, the biscuit manufacturer; and George Pinsford, the coachmaker.'

'Biscuit manufacturer!' I exclaimed. 'Do you suppose I would marry a low tradesman? Aren't there the county families, stupid?'

Well, here I am, after two weary years' home life with uncle Robert, who I must say is the dearest old thing in the world. Here I am, nearly twenty, and no nearer finding the prince of fairy lore than when I left Miss Worrie's establishment for young ladies at Kilmorden, after three years' experience as pupil-teacher. Here I am, a poor drudge of a governess, at just ten pounds a quarter, thankful for being asked down to the drawing-room, where my beauty goes for very little. All Mrs. Hazleton's friends have found out by this time that I am 'only the governess,' and have left off asking one another who I am, as they used to do at first with some show of interest. I sing, or play, and some one who has been chattering the whole time says languidly, 'Very nice, really. *Thank* you, Miss Faunthorpe.' And I sit in the angle between the back drawing-room fireplace and the window-curtain for the rest of the evening, watching and listening, with no more part in what is going on than if I were at a theatre.

Let me look in the glass and see what this lauded beauty is which has brought me so little luck. A small straight nose very sharply cut, a short upper lip, under lip a thought too full, teeth good, chin round and dimpled, face a perfect oval, eyes darkest brown; the sort of eyes which, I believe, are usually called black. Hair dark brown, with a tinge of gold where it ripples—the colour usually called chestnut. Present expression discontent and a tendency to ill temper.

I have given up that foolish notion of a rich husband, but I sometimes indulge in another day-dream, perhaps just as foolish. What if my rich uncle, Stephen Trenchard, were to come home, take a fancy to me, and leave me a fortune? Such things have happened. I remember how my poor mother used to talk of her brother Stephen, the Indian merchant, and of the ship that was coming home to bring her ease and comfort, and which never came. Will the ship come home for me, I wonder, now that my poor mother has been lying ten years in her quiet grave?

December 13.—The most wonderful thing has happened—the most unlooked-for, the most extraordinary. My heart beats so fast at the mere thought of it, that I am almost breathless as I write these lines. My hand trembles, and the letters look blurred and dim before my eyes.

I have seen the son of Philip Secretan, my uncle

Stephen's deadly enemy—the man whom he supplanted in the affections of a weak old father—for surely any father must be weak who would disinherit his son in favour of a dependant, the man from whom he received the injury that lamed him for life. How often have I heard my mother tell the story, always putting her brother's conduct in the most favourable light! He was honest, indefatigable, steady—a favourite clerk in the firm of Secretan Brothers, Manchester merchants. He fully deserved the unexpected fortune that came to him, while Philip's dissipation and extravagance were justly rewarded by disinheritance. Yet somehow in spite of poor mamma's special pleading, my sympathy was always with this unfortunate Mr. Secretan, who saw his father's wealth pass into the possession of his father's confidential clerk.

I once asked mamma what kind of a man this Philip Secretan was. She told me that she had only seen him once in her life, but that he impressed her as being remarkably handsome and a perfect gentleman.

And now I have seen his son, Captain Secretan.

He was at Mrs. Hazleton's party last night. I had no idea who he was till afterwards. He was standing before the fireplace in the back drawing-room when I went back to my corner after singing 'Porghi Amor,' standing with his back to the fire talking to old Colonel Syceman. He is tall and strong-looking, and has, to my mind, a most beautiful countenance. I never called a man beautiful before, and I dare say I shall laugh at the expression when I read over this stupid diary some day ; but I cannot call his face less than beautiful. It is such a noble face, with just the grand look I could fancy in Achilles. I was reading Pope's 'Iliad' to the children this afternoon, and I thought of Captain Secretan every time Achilles spoke. It seemed to me almost as if I could see him standing up before me, confronting Agamemnon. He is dark, with boldly cut features, a good-humoured expression about the mouth, and a somewhat dreamy look in the dark gray eyes. I have seen handsomer faces, but none that ever interested me as deeply. He is a man I should believe in with all my soul if he were my friend ;

a man I should lean upon as on a rock of defence if he were of my kindred. But he is nothing to me, and I am hardly likely to see him again.

Mrs. Hazleton spoke of him at luncheon to-day as a foolish young fellow who has sold his commission, and whose future career must be disastrous unless some distant relations were to die and leave him their property. As a rule, distant relations are not so obliging. She spoke with her reverential tone of his family, which is one of the oldest in Hampshire, although his grandfather was a Manchester merchant; and she informed me that his irst cousin, once removed, is a baronet, Sir Douglas Secretan, with a large estate in somewhere or other.

I wonder whether I shall ever see him again.

December 30.—I have seen him again, three, four, five, six, seven times. Three times in Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room, three times in the park, when I was out walking with the children; and once in Desmond Street when I had gone out alone to post a letter.

I dare say it was very wrong, and that I shall be ashamed of myself when I read over this dreadful diary, but when Captain Secretan asked me whether I ever walked in the park with the children, I said yes; and when he asked me what time, I said between three and five; and after that, when he asked me if I ever went out alone, I told him yes, sometimes, just before half-past five, to post my home letter.

How kind he is! how clever! how interesting! and how well we seem to know each other, though we have only met seven times! There is evidently no association for him in the name of Faunthorpe. This is only natural, as my mother did not marry till some years after her brother's quarrel with Philip Secretan. How much I regret, now, that I did not learn the exact particulars of that quarrel I have only a vague idea of the circumstances; but from what my mother told me, I know that although Philip Secretan was the sufferer, my uncle Stephen was as vindictive as if he also had been injured.

Perhaps the injurer is sometimes more angry than the injured.

My mother always declared that her brother was innocent of guile or wrong-doing from first to last, but now that I know Mr. Secretan's son I feel still more inclined to side with my uncle's enemy.

He, Captain Secretan, has told me the history of his life, his careless happy youth spent abroad, with a father and mother whom he idolized. He was educated at Heidelberg, came from Heidelberg to Woolwich, to an army tutor, joined his regiment at twenty, and sold out after five years' service, a few months ago. He has now all the world before him, he says, and has only to choose a career. He is energetic and clever, and can hardly miss success in anything he may attempt.

How changed our walks seem, now that there is always the chance of meeting him! As I see him coming to meet us along the wintry avenue, the familiar scene seems to grow beautiful, the sun shines brighter, the birds break out into singing. They may have been singing before, perhaps, and I too absorbed to hear them; but it seems as if they began a glad chorus at his coming. I did not think that winter afternoons could be so beautiful; the calm still air, the blue-gray sky, the black tracery of the tall elm trees against the yellow sunset.

He told me yesterday that his father would have been a rich man, but for the treachery of a friend whom he had loved and trusted. A cold sick feeling came over me, just as if the treachery had been mine, and I had suddenly come face to face with my victim.

'The only lesson my father ever taught me was to revile that man's name, and to carry my hatred of him with me to the grave. An evil lesson for a kind-hearted man to teach, you'll say; but for all that, I don't believe there ever beat a kinder heart than my father's.'

I can easily believe this. Kindness and sweet temper are Captain Secretan's chief characteristics; a bright good humour which cheers one like sunshine. A way of looking at life on the pleasantest side which would inspire hopefulness in the most dismal mind. I know how low-spirited, discontented, and wretched I was growing just before I knew him, and how changed and brightened life seems to me now.

The children doat upon him, and are as pleased as I am to meet him in our walks. He talks to them about all their small pleasures, and is able to interest himself in their ideas much better than I, who spend my life with them. Sometimes he paces up and down the broad walk with the three girls hanging about him, telling them one of the fairy tales we all know so well, and he has a way of giving a new charm and interest to the old stories, while his little touches of modern slang come in here and there with the funniest effect, and set us off laughing till the tree-tops seem to shake with our laughter.

'How odd that we should meet you again to-day, Captain Secretan!' cried Magdalen the day before yesterday, when we found him at the entrance of the broad walk.

'Not at all odd, if you insist on coming this way, little one,' he said. 'This is my afternoon constitutional. But if you very much object I'll take the other side of the park.'

'Oh, no, no, please come always,' shouted the three; and then they asked for Cinderella, Captain

Secretan's modernized Cinderella, whose ball dress was made in New Bond Street, and whose cruel step-mother had a box on the second tier at Covent Garden.

It was yesterday afternoon that I met him in Desmond Street, a dreary drizzling afternoon, which made me think the sooner the year came to an end the better. I had been feeling rather depressed and disheartened all the morning. The children had all gone to a morning performance of the pantomime at Drury Lane, and I had the day to myself, as Mrs. Hazleton graciously informed me. I don't think leisure is an unalloyed good for those who have few pleasant thoughts to brighten their solitude. I sat mending my clothes, and thinking about Captain Secretan. My thoughts were not happy ones. I was shocked to find what a hold this stranger had taken upon my mind, and how difficult it was for me to think of any one else, or to imagine my life without him. Yet I knew that he was nothing, and never could be anything to me. Poor, but proud, and of good birth, moving in what Mrs. Hazleton calls the best society, he will naturally select a woman of fortune for his wife. He is handsome, agreeable, has many gifts which distinguish him from the common run of young men, and will have no difficulty in making an advantageous marriage. Of an obscure little pauper like me he would never think seriously for a moment, unless his thoughts were dishonourable; and I know him and trust him well enough already to wager my life against that. What has he to do with me, then, or I with him? Absolutely nothing. We are only fooling each other by this friendship, which is so sweet to me, and which must needs have some charm for him, since he takes the trouble to cultivate it. Better for both of us that we should see each other no more, or only upon the public stage of Mrs. Hazleton's drawing-room. I will tell him so seriously and honestly the next time we are alone together for a minute or two, while the three girls march on before us. This doesn't often happen, for I think Lucinda is more deeply in love with the captain than——! What was I going to write? Than a girl of twelve ought to be. This is the lecture which I read myself yesterday while I worked at that tiresome mending. All my Christmas quarter's salary will go for a black silk dress, as I must have one good and fashionably made gown to wear downstairs. I wanted so much to have sent uncle Robert a little present, and I should have liked to buy Marion a winter hat; but that is out of the question. Shall I have my dress made with flounces, or a trained skirt?

It was dark when I went out to post my letter; dark, and wet, and uncomfortable, and there was nothing farther from my thoughts than the idea of meeting Captain Secretan between Lowther Street and the post office, though I am bound to confess that the captain himself was not very far from my thoughts. I had posted my letter, and was coming away from the office, when a tall man, looking very big in a great rough overcoat, crossed the road and came towards me. I knew him in a moment, but a strange shy feeling came over me, and I walked on ever so fast, pretending not to know him. The street is quiet and lonely, and I heard his footsteps hurrying after me.

'Do you always walk like a sporting pedestrian when you are alone, Miss Faunthorpe?' he asked, coming by my side.

I started a little at the sound of his voice, although I knew so well that he was there. Yesterday was one of my nervous days, I suppose. I said something about its being such a disagreeable evening.

'Yes,' he answered, with his good-tempered laugh, 'the old year is making himself as obnoxious as he can in order that we may not regret him. It is rather unpleasant weather. You dislike this drizzling rain I dare say. I rather like it, for it reminds me of grouse-shooting in the Highlands. I was even going to ask you to take a little walk round Eccleston Square before you go back to your schoolroom.'

'I couldn't think of such a thing,' I answered, sharply, feeling that the proposal was an impertinence.

'Couldn't you? Then it wasn't right in me to propose it, I suppose,' he replied, placidly. 'And yet I should be so glad of half an hour's quiet talk with you. It's very nice telling the children fairy stories, but rather a hindrance to conversation. Well, we'll postpone the walk round the square till we've pleasanter weather and you know me better. Do you know I have been thinking of you so much in the last few days."

Had he? There must be something sympathetic in our thoughts then, for he has never been out of mine.

We had turned into Lowther Street by this time, and I was weak enough to be glad that it is such a long street. I would not have gone three yards out of my way with him if the happiness of my life had depended on it, but there was no harm in letting him walk as far as Mrs. Hazleton's door with me.

'Yes, I have been thinking about you a good deal, Miss Faunthorpe,' he said, after a pause. 'I have been thinking what might have happened if I had been a rich man and free to follow my own inclination.'

This was telling me plainly that he was neither rich nor free.

'Can you guess what I fancied would have happened in that case?'

'No, indeed.'

'I thought it just possible that I might have been tempted to ask you to be my wife.'

He waited for my reply, but I was dumb. I felt choking, and could not find a word to answer him.

'What would you have said in that case?'

Some diabolical counsellor suggested a flippant answer instead of a serious one.

'Isn't your question rather like Lord Dundreary's?' I asked. 'If you had had a brother, do you think he would have liked cheese?'

'I see,' he said, with a disappointed tone, 'I am not to expect a serious answer to a hypothetical question. I dare say you are right, Miss Faunthorpe In all life's delicate questions women are always wiser than men.'

I thought that he had taken the easiest way of telling me that his circumstances forbade him to think of marrying me.

'In that case,' I said to myself, 'he has no right to waylay me as I come from the post;' and I tried to feel very angry with him.

'So you didn't go home to spend your Christmas holidays?' he said presently.

'Home! Do you suppose I could afford to travel to Yorkshire and back for a week's pleasure? Besides, I have no real home. My sisters and I are dependent on my uncle's bounty, and he is only a parish doctor, who finds it a hard thing to pay his butcher and baker.'

I was determined to let him know how poor I am, and how wise he has been in coming to the conclusion that I am no wife for him.

'Poor little thing.' he said compassionately, and his pity did me good somehow. It did not gall, as most people's pity does.

'Poor little girl,' he said again, after a few moments' silence. 'An orphan, and sent out into the world to bear the burden of servitude and all ill-usage "that patient merit from the unworthy takes." One would suppose that you could hardly be worse off than you are at present?'

This was not very cheering, but I said nothing. We were near Mrs. Hazleton's door by this time, and yet we had been walking slowly.

'Any change would be for the better, one would think,' he said, musingly. 'A change that would give this poor little waif a sworn protector and defender,—a husband pledged to toil for her and cherish her. But a poor husband—a man at war with fortune—bah! I'll tell you what it is, Miss Faunthorpe,' he burst out suddenly, 'with your lovely face you ought to make a brilliant marriage.'

'So I was told when I was sixteen,' said I, 'but I'm almost twenty, and the fairy prince in the shape of a rich husband hasn't appeared yet.'

'You wouldn't despise an eligible opportunity of exchanging Mrs. Hazleton's schoolroom for a house in Kensington Palace Gardens, I suppose? You have a feminine inclination for fine clothes, servants with powdered heads, carriages and horses, and a box at the opera?'

"I am human, and I don't pretend to be superior to the weaknesses of humanity,' I answered, feeling that I was making myself intensely disagreeable.

He provoked me, somehow, by his nonchalant manner of discussing my position and prospects. Luckily, we were quite at the door now, and I was able to beat a retreat before anything still more unpleasant had been said upon either side.

'Good afternoon, Captain Secretan,' I said.

'It must be good-bye,' he answered, 'I am going into Norfolk to-morrow for a month's shooting.'

I felt as if he had said that he was going to Australia, but I only answered 'Oh, in that case, good-bye;' and so we shook hands again, and then he lifted his hat and went away, while I gave the bell a good sharp pull that insured its being answered promptly.

I don't quite know whether I like him or hate him; but whichever feeling it is, it must be rather strong of its kind, as I cannot get him out of my thoughts. I am inclined to think that it is hatred. What could be more disagreeable or humiliating than his way of speaking about me before my face, as if I had been miles away? 'Poor thing, poor little waif!'

I grow hot and red when I think of it.

Jan. 14.—The year is just a fortnight old. There has been snow, but bright clear weather, a blue sky, and sunshine. We walk in Kensington Gardens every day, and meet him every day. He makes the three girls run races with their hoops, he being umpire, and during the race he and I are able to talk without restraint. He only stopped four days in Norfolk. He told me that the shooting was very good, but that he was bored to death after the second day, and yet it was in a pleasant country house that he was staying at, according to his own account. There was to be a ball the very day after he came away, but he did not care to stay for it. Curious man!

My black silk dress has come, and is a great success. I dread to see the dressmaker's bill, as I have only reserved a sovereign for the making, and I am afraid she will charge me something nearer three. The dress certainly fits to perfection, and is beautifully finished; the trimmings simple, but of the best quality. At home, Marion and I used to make our own dresses, but after going nearly out of my mind for a week over piping-cord and button-holes, I always felt myself a dowdy at the last.

Mrs. Hazleton has a dinner party to-morrow, Captain Secretan is coming in the evening, and I shall wear my new dress. Have I made up my mind yet whether I like him or hate him?

Yes. I do neither. I love him—love him—love him.

There, it is written at last. Foolish old diary, how I shall despise you and myself some day when I read over this wretched page!

Jan. 16.—Such a delicious party last night! Captain Secretan was the first person I saw when I slipped quietly in at the back drawing-room door. He was watching the door, and those dark eyes brightened at sight of me. I sang to him, I played to him, I talked to him, the party was all him. The rest of the people were only the medium through which I saw him,—or they were like trees in a landscape, and he the living figure in the foreground. I know he likes to talk to me, and to hear me sing or play; but I wonder whether he loves *me.*

Feb. 3.—It has come at last. He has aked me plainly, straightforwardly, anxiously, earnestly, to be his wife.

He has told me that he is poor, that he is living just now on the money he got for his commission. He has nothing else, but he has youth, health, and strength, some talents, and he is willing to work. With a wife whom he fondly loved he would have a motive for beginning a new career.

'I'm such a happy-go-lucky fellow,' he said, in his bright, cheery way, 'that I can hardly bring myself to put my shoulder to the wheel for my own sake, but if I had you to work for, pet, I should slave like a Goliath.'

I don't like to remind him that the Philistine soldier was more remarkable for strength than industry.

He made me say yes, and promise whatever he liked. How could I resist him, when I love him so dearly that the lightest touch of his hand makes me tremble? and there seems to me more pathos in his voice than in the tenderest phrase of Mozart's. He is so straightforward, so candid, so noble. He wanted to take Mrs. Hazleton into his confidence immediately, so that I might be married very quietly from her house.

'We have nothing to wait for, darling,' he said, 'unless we were to wait till I have made a fortune, which would mean at least half a dozen years of severance,—just the brightest, happiest years of life sacrificed to a sordid scruple, an unworthy doubt of Providence. If you love me, Sibyl, you will not talk of waiting.'

'I should like to be wise and prudent,' I told him, 'but your impetuosity carries me along like a torrent.'

'Love is a torrent,' answered he, 'do not oppose so poor a thing as reason against its sacred might.'

I entreated him to say nothing to Mrs. Hazleton. An idea had occurred to me which made me hesitate, even with my lover's hand clasping mine, as to the wisdom of yielding to his prayer.

I remembered a strange fact, which had almost slipped out of my mind lately. I remembered that Alexis Secretan is the natural inheritor of his father's hatred, the natural enemy of my rich uncle, Stephen Trenchard, the uncle from whom I have been taught to expect a fortune. If I marry Captain Secretan, I surrender all hope of favour from my uncle.

I begged Alex—he has taught me to call him Alex—to say nothing to Mrs. Hazleton yet awhile. I wanted time to think.

After all, this hope of fortune from my uncle Stephen may be only a dream, vain as that idea of a rich husband with which I used to delude myself when I was a school girl. On the other hand, I have the knowledge from my poor mother that my uncle was a very rich man twenty years ago (I have the knowledge from his last letter to my uncle Robert, enclosing a twenty-pound bank bill as a present for Marion and me); that he has never married, and has no intention of marrying; that he looks forward to returning to his native country in a few years and making the acquaintance of his nieces. Too good a chance in all this, surely, to be thrown away. It would be rather a bitter thing for me to see Marion chosen for her uncle's heiress, while I was left a pauper.

What am I to do? How am I to choose between Alexis and the possibility of a large fortune?

Prudence suggests that I should only pledge myself to Alexis on condition that our marriage shall be deferred for some years.

We are both young. We can afford to wait a few years, and yet have a good deal of the brightness of life before us. My uncle Stephen is an old man, older no doubt at his age than men who have spent their lives in Europe. Whether I am to inherit any portion of his wealth is a question that must be decided in a few years. I must tell Alex that he must wait. If his love is real and earnest it cannot be lessened by time.

Feb. 5. I have told him my decision. Vain, hopeless, to talk of reason with a man whose inclination is his only law. He tells me that if I really cared for him I could not propose dreary years of separation. My statement that I have rich relatives who may leave me money if I marry to please them, and are sure to leave me nothing if I marry without their consent, fell on ears obstinately deaf to reason Love like this is worse than a torrent—it is a maelstrom. Prudence, reason, worldly wisdom, are mere straws in the whirlpool. I must see him no more.

Feb. 7. I have seen him again. Poor Alex! He looks so unhappy. How sweet to know that I have such power over him!—I, to whom he seemed such a far-off creature two months ago. Is the chance of fortune worth such a love as his?

Feb. 8. Stephen Trenchard may live to be as old as Old Parr, and leave his money to the Asylum for Idiots, after I have sacrificed youth and love and all that is sweetest in life to the sordid hope of fortune.

Feb. 9. A hopelessly wet day. I have seen him walk up and down the street three times in the rain. I know his dear umbrella.

Feb. 11. In the Broad Walk again yesterday. It is all settled. I am to give Mrs. Hazleton a month's notice to-morrow — our agreement is a month's notice on either side—in the event of my proving inefficient, she said. Not in the event of my not liking the situation. Oh dear no, of course not.

I am so agitated that I can hardly write. This day month I am to have my boxes packed, and go quietly away in a cab at ten o'clock in the morning, drive to the station and deposit my luggage, and then meet Alexis, with whom I shall drive back to the quietest little church in Ecclestonia, where we are to be married. No witnesses but the pew-opener and the clerk ; no announcement in the *Times*. The secret of our marriage kept from everybody who knows us, at the outset, at any rate, so that if Stephen Trenchard dies in India—a likely thing after all—I may still inherit my share of his fortune. Dear old uncle Robert is such an easy-going man, that as long as I tell him I am comfortably situated with my employer he will never put himself out of the way to know more. He has not an acquaintance in London whom he could ask to call upon me at Mrs. Hazleton's. There is no such isolation as poverty.

I have arranged with Jane Dimond, the under housemaid, about my letters. She will receive any that come to Lowther Street for me, and post any that I send her to be posted. I have given her quite a heap of things, the weeding out of my wardrobe, and made her my friend for life.

March 11. To-morrow is to be my wedding day. Oh fearful day! on which hangs all my life to come. Will the future be blessed or accursed for to-morrow's vows?

I wish Marion and uncle Robert could have been with me. It would all have seemed more real. I remember my foolish fancies—my castles in the air. The grand wedding at which I used to see myself figuring as chief performer; my white satin dress and Brussels flounces; the carriages; the favours; the crowd; Mendelssohn's Wedding March; the joyous peal of bells. Those bells are sounding in my ears to-night.

To-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow! Before noon to-morrow I shall have ceased to be Sibyl Faunthorpe. My name will be Sibyl Secretan—name of all others most abhorrent to my uncle, Stephen Trenchard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ELITE OF REDCASTLE.

Redcastle is a country town. It is not a manufacturing town, or a seaport, or a garrison town, or a settlement in any manner designed to be of wide and general use to society. It exists for itself alone, and is exclusive to a fault. It is on the high road to nowhere. Erase it from the map of England to-morrow, and nobody but its own inhabitants would be the worse off for its evanishment. It produces nothing but elderly people with limited incomes, and scandal. For the cultivation of this last article Redcastle is like a mushroom bed in a cellar, a dark corner of the land in which fungi abound and flourish.

It is not a bad town in which to enjoy a brief span of repose from the turmoil and bustle of the industrial and commercial world;—the world of labour and pleasure, profit, loss, and pain. Not a bad old town in which to dream away a joyless, painless old age. But to live in Redcastle, to bound one's hopes within its brick and mortar confines, to regulate one's life by its petty proprieties and narrow creed! Heaven pity that wretch to whom destiny flings the lot of life-long bondage in Redcastle.

It is a clean old town. Scarcely in laborious Holland, where the servant maids scrub the chimney-pots and pipe clay the gutters, would you find a cleaner. A rainy day, which makes mud and slush in busier places, only washes down and renovates Redcastle. The one wide street, with its massive old brick houses, square, and strong, and substantial—the historic gateway, which divides the one street into two, Below Bar and Above Bar—and the fine old Coach and Horses Inn, where seldom coaches or horses are seen to stop, the inn which, save for the mildest indulgence in billiards, and brandy and soda among the youth of the town, seems to exist rather as a part and parcel of Redcastle, an institution essential to the honour and glory of the town, than for any commercial purpose, since it appears morally impossible that the establishment can be self-supporting,—all these are the pink of cleanliness. The pretty little minster, more architecturally perfect than many a grander fane, looks as if it were kept under a glass shade. The market-place presents on off days a broad expanse of spotless pavement blinking and smiling up at the sun. The turnpike road on which Redcastle lies is one of the best in Yorkshire; the narrow lanes and by-streets leading up to that broad stretch of common land known as Redcastle Woods, apparently for the sole reason that it is barren of anything taller than a hazel-bush, are innocent of mud or smoke. The scanty suburbs of the town present a sprinkling of smallish houses, for the most part uninteresting of aspect, but all scrupulously clean. Those modern edifices, the Wesleyan Chapel, the Independent Chapel, and that masonic temple the Athena Lodge, are of whitest freestone, with shining windows, and hearthstoned steps embellishing their classic porticoes.

Redcastle, producing nothing, and offering no attraction to visitors, is naturally not a wealthy settlement. The rich inhabitants of Redcastle can be counted on the fingers of a single hand. Yet there is perhaps no town in England in which respect for wealth is more deeply implanted in the human mind. It is a saying of the profane that twopence halfpenny will not consort with twopence in Redcastle, but this is not a true saying, for more than it worships wealth does Redcastle worship appearances, and if A, with twopence, can put on the semblance of threepence, he shall be assuredly held higher than C, who lacks the art to obtain as much show out of twopence halfpenny.

The *élite* of Redcastle—that is to say, persons of fixed income or established professional earning, ranging from eight to eighteen hundred per annum—live within a narrow circle. The houses immediately below Bar, and the houses immediately above Bar, shelter the aristocracy of the town. Below Bar, grave old red-brick houses of the early Georgian period, roomy, and comfortable within, respectable of aspect without; above Bar, houses of a more modern date, stone façades, French windows, porches, verandahs, larger gardens, and ostentatious stabling, rarely used, save for the accommodation of a pony chaise, like one of Falstaff's buck baskets.

Within this charmed circle, in the largest of the stone-fronted houses above Bar, resides Colonel Stormont, who enjoys the privileges of retirement and half-pay, cheered by the society of his wife and family, the family consisting of a grown-up son and two grown-up daughters who, of various views upon other questions, are at one in the opinion that Redcastle was called into being for their especial behoof, and who regulate their conduct by that idea.

Colonel and Mrs. Stormont take the lead in Redcastle society. Their names are at the head of the croquet and archery club, which black-balls every one who is suspected of having once had a cousin connected with trade. They are chief patrons of the assize and masonic balls. They sanctify the more chaste and classic of the Redcastle concerts with their august presence, or, at least, Mrs. Stormont allows her name to grace the list of patronesses, and add a lustre to the programme of the evening's harmony. If St. Cecilia had come to life again she could hardly have been in more request among the concert-givers than Mrs. Stormont, who scarcely knows Mozart from Offenbach, or Beethoven from Brinley Richards.

To offend Colonel and Mrs. Stormont would be to be at war with Redcastle; and it is doubtful if any one so unfortunately placed could continue to reside in the town. He would be obliged to depart, exiled by that awful ban; like Ovid from Rome. or Dante from Florence.

In the large stucco-fronted house with the Norman turret resides Mr. Marlin Spyke, the great shipbuilder of Krampston-on-Tybur. Mr. and Mrs. Spyke live with some splendour, but a self-contained kind of life, not conducive to wide popularity. They receive very little company, their names grace the subscription list of no local charity. they patronize no local entertainment, they attend no masonic or benevolent ball. They are negatively great, and will be remembered when they are dead for the many noble deeds they have not done.

After the Stormonts and the Marlin Spykes come the professional classes below Bar; Mr. Jewson, the chief local solicitor and vestry clerk; Dr. Mitsand, an elderly man of some distinction, being one of the army surgeons who endured and ameliorated the miseries of the Crimean war; Mr. Groshen, the banker; Mr. Farrer, the curate; and a few others, whom it is needless to particularize. On the outskirts of the town reside three or four gentlemen who derive their income from houses or lands, are more rustic in their bearing and attire than the inhabitants of the citadel, and in a general way give themselves airs, as affecting to belong to the county families. Afar off in their various fastnesses, isolated, inaccessible, unapproachable, live the county families. A few of them are on visiting terms with the Stormonts, Dr. Mitsand, and the clergy of Redcastle; but they regard the town otherwise as a depôt for groceries and draperies, and a centre of Radicalism for the lower classes. Their big family landaus, with tall, slab-sided horses and brass harness, pervade the street on fine afternoons; their sons trot briskly through the quiet town on hunting mornings in well-worn pink. They turn out occasionally for a concert, and take care to testify by loud talk and laughter among themselves, and a supercilious contemplation of the rest of the audience through eye-glasses, that they hold themselves as creatures apart from the townspeople.

Within ten miles of Redcastle is that thriving seaport, Krampston-on-Tybur, famous for ship-building, ropemaking, linseed crushing, sugar baking, and general exportation and importation. Krampston has noisy, bustling streets, miles of quays, labyrinths of docks, drawbridges that arrest the pedestrian at every turn, so intersected is the land by narrow inlets of water. Krampston has very little 'society,' in the Redcastle sense of that word, but it has commercial activity, the vigorously throbbing pulse of active and useful life, name, and place and power in the world. The word 'Krampston' branded on bale or packing-case is familiar in Buenos Ayres or Sierra Leone, in Pernambuco or Timbuctoo, while the name of

Redcastle is hardly known out of the post office or British Gazetteer.

Among the *elite* of Redcastle—the archons—the equestrian order—Robert Faunthorpe, surgeon and parish doctor, has no place. The *élite* give him good-day when they meet him trudging toilfully above or below Bar, or trotting meekly along one of the lanes on his unkempt pony. Good, easy-going little man, ever ready to help the helpless to whom he ministers, often squeezing a shilling or a sixpence out of his ill-furnished purse where he feels that drugs alone are of no avail. Kindly gentleman though he is, the *élite* of Redcastle cannot recognise him as a member of their order. He lives in a shabby red house at the fag-end of the town, grooms his pony, digs in the garden, keeps one old woman-servant of eccentric aspect; he takes snuff inordinately—perhaps it is his only consolation—and the normal shabbiness of his clothes is enhanced by the process. His existence is altogether unorthodox. He is beyond the pale.

True that he has reared three orphan nieces, the children of a brother who died penniless ten years ago; and it is hardly to be supposed that this act of benevolence has not cost him as much as the maintenance of a groom and gardener. But Redcastle cannot recognise these small charities. They judge a man as they judge his house, by the front which he presents to the world. They would recognise the groom and gardener as elements of social status. They smile gently at the idea of the three orphan nieces as a harmless eccentricity of that eccentric little man, Dr. Faunthorpe.

Happily Robert Faunthorpe, M.R.C.S., and Dr. by courtesy, is of all men the last to regret that social heaven to which he has never ascended. He sees Colonel and Mrs. Stormont, Dr. Mitsand, and Mr. and Mrs. Groshen revolving in their orbits as he sees the planets, and envies them no more. The idea that they do him any unkindness by not inviting him to their dinner parties, by not extending the hand of friendship to his fatherless nieces, never enters his mind. He is so simple-minded a little man that he is content to go his way and let other people go theirs.

An eccentric, evidently, as Redcastle opines.

CHAPTER VII.

DRIFTING INTO HAVEN.

It is a soft, calm evening, early in April, and Dr. Faunthorpe's shabby old house is as much brightened by the westering sunlight as it can be brightened by anything less than the three coats of paint for which its worm-eaten woodwork has been languishing for the last twenty years. There has not been a five-pound note expended upon the repair or the beautification of Robert Faunthorpe's house within the memory of the oldest inhabitant of Redcastle. It is scrupulously clean, and that is the best that can be said of it. There is a small garden in front, where flourish those homely perennials which demand little care and no artificial nutriment,—lupins, Canterbury bells, flags, London pride, polyanthuses, primroses, and wall-flowers. Behind the house there is a long strip of ground where the surgeon cultivates cabbages and potatoes, leeks and potherbs, leaving only two narrow borders for floriculture. Happily there are ancient rose bushes in these neglected borders,—rose bushes from which Beauty's father might have gathered those large red cup-shaped cabbage roses that grow in a child's picture book. The borders are edged with box, tall and thick,—box that has been growing for a century. The low red walls, crumbling into hollows where the birds have pecked at the brickwork, crowned with dragon's-mouth, stonecrop, and houseleek, would be delicious in a picture, and are not unlovely in reality. At the bottom of this long narrow garden there is a patch of ground set apart for the benefit of Scrub, the pony, upon which grow purple-flowered tares, three crops in a twelvemonth sometimes.

Within, the house has a certain air of homely comfort. The shabby old furniture has that well-worn look which in some wise endears goods and chattels to their owners. Beeswax and labour have done their best to brighten and beautify the ancient mahogany bureaus, the clumsy walnutwood bedsteads and tables,—made at a time when walnutwood was almost as cheap as deal. Cracked old jars and bottles of common blue delf adorn the tall narrow wooden mantelpieces; curtains of watered moreen, once crimson, but faded to a tawny brown, drape the deeply recessed windows of parlour and surgery. The rooms are spacious, but low; the ceilings sustained by massive beams painted black. The walls are for the most part paneled, and the paneling has been painted a dingy pink or a dirty drab. To keep this paneling spotless is the old servant's anxious care, and much house-flannel and soft soap are expended thereupon to Dr. Faunthorpe's aggravation,—that good easy man having no passion for cleanliness in the abstract.

A wide stone passage leads from the front door to the half-glass door opening into the back garden, thus letting light and air through the old house. A clumsy mahogany-framed barometer, a row of hat-pegs, and a faded map of England are the only furniture of this passage, or hall, as a modern house-agent would call it. A roomy, solid old staircase, with shallow treads, and ponderous balusters, leads to the upper chambers, which are numerous and of fair size. To the right of the front door is the parlour, on the left the surgery. Behind the surgery is the best parlour; behind the every-day parlour is the large stone-paved kitchen.

For this house, with its acre of garden, Dr. Faunthorpe pays twenty pounds a year; so there is some saving of house-rent in residence at Redcastle, if your soul aspires not after any higher state than comfortable vegetation, and you are content to inhabit the inferior end of the town.

Dr. Faunthorpe paces his front garden on this calm April evening, smoking his pipe. He is a smoker as well as a snuffer, and finds solace in tobacco after his daily round. This is his hour of rest and leisure. True that it may be broken in upon at any moment by some sudden call for his services, but his regular daily labour, his measured grind at life's mill, is over.

He prefers the small front garden for his evening pipe to the larger ground at the back,—first, because he is to the fore if wanted; and secondly, because, his house being on the high road, it is just possible that something may go by, vehicle or passenger, to the enlivenment of his leisure.

He is meditative and silent, but not alone. His niece Marion, a tall girl with wavy light hair, and a pre-Raphaelite figure, stands in a listless attitude by the gate. His niece Jenny, an overgrown girl of twelve, with a very short frock and stalwart legs, encased in brown worsted stockings, is watering the flowers, and making as much mess as it is possible to make in the operation.

'Just look what puddles you are making in the path, stupid,' exclaims the elder sister, peevishly regarding the efforts of her junior. 'I do wish you'd leave things alone. You're always up to some mischief or other.'

'I suppose I shouldn't be mischievous if I let the primroses die for want of water,' remonstrates the junior, in no wise abashed. 'That's what you'd do, with your laziness and fine-lady ways. You were bad enough before you went to stay with uncle Stephen, but you're ever so much worse now. I'm sure I wish he'd kept you there instead of sending you back, like a bad penny. Uncle Robert and I were as jolly as sandboys while you were away.'

The young person sets down her water-pot and delivers this diatribe with arms akimbo, like Madame Angot's daughter. Marion shudders.

'Sandboys! What an expression for a young lady!' she ejaculates.

'Pray where's the harm in sandboys?' demands the incorrigible Jenny. 'They're more respectable than you, as far as I can see, for they get their own living.'

'My dear,' remonstrates uncle Robert mildly, 'that is not the way to address your elder sister.'

'Why does she come and loaf about here, then, with her stuckupishness? Why doesn't she go and be a governess like Sibyl? If she heard what Hester says of her she'd be ashamed of herself.'

'My love, you have no right to quote Hester.'

'Hester is an impertinent, mischief-making creature,' exclaims Marion.

'And as to your sister going out as a governess, my dear,' continues uncle Robert mildly, 'with her expectations it would be about the most foolish thing she could do.'

'Expectations,—dead men's shoes!' exclaims the terrible child, twirling the watering-can so that its last drops sprinkle Marion's pretty blue dress. 'I should hate myself if *I* was mean enough to calculate upon what any one would leave me.'

'Quite right of you,' says Marion, with a supercilious laugh—that sneering schoolgirl laugh, which we all remember to have been crushed by occasionally in our youth,—'for certainly no one is likely to leave *you* money.'

'I dare say not, with you in the way,' answers the irrepressible Jenny. They'd feel they were doing an act of charity bestowing their fortune on you, for it would be the same as leaving it to the Asylum for Idiots. One simpleton provided for, at any rate.'

With this the imp swings round upon her heels as on a pivot, brandishes the watering-pot as an Indian savage his club, and gallops into the house. Jane Faunthorpe never walks. She has the action of an unbroken colt, and seems, when in motion, to have as many legs as that animal. When she comes downstairs there is a sound as of a sack of coals flung from the upper story. How the old house sustains itself under her youthful vigour is a mystery to the parish doctor.

'I'd run after her and give her a good box on the ears,' says Marion, viciously, 'if I didn't want to see the omnibus go by.'

The omnibus is a stunted covered vehicle, like a carrier's cart garnished with glazed windows, which plies between the station and the outskirts of Redcastle, and it is nearly time for this conveyance to pass with its evening freight. There are sometimes as many as five people arrive by the six o'clock train from Krampston,—nay, the Krampston train sometimes brings that rare bird, a passenger from London.

'It's a pity you ever sent that child to a day school, uncle Robert,' Marion remarks presently, wiping the waterspots daintily from her dress. 'She was bad enough before, but now she is simply intolerable.'

'My love, I couldn't afford a boarding school, and I was obliged to send her somewhere,' replies the surgeon, in his longsuffering way. 'At home she was learning only to dig potatoes and to whistle, neither of which pursuits is an attractive accomplishment in a young lady. The child is not bad at bottom.'

'Perhaps not,' answers Marion, snappishly, 'but the bottom must be a long way down. I've never come to it yet.'

'She is very warm-hearted.'

'Yes, if warmth of heart consists in rushing at one like an avalanche, hugging one round the neck like a bear, and rumpling one's collar atrociously, without the faintest provocation.'

'She is not of an idle disposition,' remonstrates the uncle. 'I found her cleaning the back kitchen windows at half-past six this morning. No one had asked her to do it.'

'Of course not. That's just the reason she did it.'

'If you would take a little more pains with her, Marion,' suggests Dr. Faunthorpe, timidly——

'Pains! I might take *agonies*, and without the least effect. Didn't I begin to teach her music——'

'Yes, my dear, but you didn't go on.'

'Well, you just try to teach her anything, uncle Robert—just try—that's all,' says Marion, with awful significance, and then breaks out with a sigh, 'Oh dear, is this precious old omnibus never coming?'

'It is rather late, my dear. But as it isn't going to bring us any one we care about, we needn't worry ourselves about it.'

'It would be something to look at just for a minute. If you only knew what a difference there is between the look-out down here and above Bar. There there's almost always something going by—Mrs. Stormont's basket carriage, or Master Groshen's pony, or the butcher's cart.'

'Ah, my dear, I'm afraid that long visit to your uncle Trenchard has spoiled you for my quiet home.'

'No, it hasn't, uncle,' answers the girl, with a little gush of feeling in the midst of her petulance, just strong enough to show the better side of her nature—'no, it hasn't, for this is home and that isn't. I should always feel that if I spent the rest of my life with uncle Stephen. Of all the old fidgets——! Well, I suppose I oughtn't to say anything against him, for he has been very kind to me in his way. He has given me a good deal of money from first to last, though I must say he doled it out stingily, as if he liked the money better than me; and it is nice staying at his house—one feels one's self somebody. Only think of the Stormonts, and the Groshens, and the Marlin Spykes calling on him before he had been three weeks in Redcastle, while you've lived here thirty years and they've never called upon you.'

'People at this end of the town are not visited, my dear,' replies the doctor, mildly, as one who bows to the mysterious ways of Providence and questions not. 'I dare say the *élite* of Redcastle called upon your uncle out of kindness, he being a stranger.'

'He being a millionaire, uncle, that's what you mean. Very much they'd have called upon him if he'd been a stranger who wanted to get his living. Think of the Stormonts giving a dinner party on purpose for him, and inviting *me*—after ignoring me for the last four years—staring me in the face, after church, for two hundred Sundays, and taking no more interest in me than if I were a stone cherub on a tablet in the minster, and now, all of a sudden, being so fond of me. It's too ridiculous. If I was as worldly as they are, I'd take a little more pains not to show it.'

'The world is worldly, my love,' replies uncle Robert, with his resigned air. 'You can hardly expect it to be otherwise. For my part, I am very glad to think that the Stormonts have taken notice of you, and that you've been invited out with Mr. Trenchard. It may lead to your making a good marriage, though you needn't set your mind upon that now, as it is tolerably certain your uncle will leave you an independence. I only wish Sibyl were at home to have her share of good fortune.'

'It's her own fault if she isn't,' says Marion.

'Say rather her conscientiousness, my dear. She doesn't like to leave Mrs. Hazleton in a difficulty about her children; and very right too. But I hope Mrs. Hazleton will suit herself with a new governess very soon, and let Sibyl come home. Mr. Trenchard has asked for her so often, and it really seems flying in the face of Providence for her to be out of the way.'

'If she wasn't a stupid, she wouldn't be at Mrs. Hazleton's beck and call,' says Marion, and then exclaims, shrilly, 'Here's the omnibus, and lots of people inside. Why, there's some one nodding to us—a lady in a gray hat—and—I declare, the 'bus is stopping. Why, it's Sibyl.'

The blundering vehicle stops before Dr. Faunthorpe's gate; a shabby carpet bag—only a carpet bag—is handed down from the roof, and in the next instant Sibyl is in the homely little garden, sobbing hysterically on her uncle's shoulder.

He presses her to his breast tenderly, and looks in the pale, wan face.

'Why, my darling, how ill you look — how changed—how thin!'

'I've had so much hard work, uncle,' she answers, faintly, 'but, thank God, I am at home at last.'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

'HOME at last,' cries the wanderer, with glad thankfulness.

This is a night of rejoicing in Dr. Faunthorpe's modest dwelling. The prodigal daughter has returned, and the fatted calf, or at least so much of him as a cutlet, fried as only Hester can fry a veal cutlet, is served up in her honour. How cheery and homely the common parlour, with its shabby old furniture, dimly illuminated by two composite candles which leave the paneled corners in densest shadow, seems to those tired eyes!

'It is so nice to be at home again, uncle,' says Sibyl lovingly, as she draws her chair a little nearer the doctor's at supper-time. 'What an old dear Hester is! and how deliciously she cooks!'

'If you're so fond of home, I wonder you stayed away so long,' remarks Marion, who cannot help being occasionally disagreeable in her petty way.

There was nothing large-minded about Marion, Sibyl used to complain. She would never commit a big sin, but would forfeit heaven by a multitude of infinitesimal faults.

'Marion's faults are like the animalculæ in a glass of water,' remarked Sibyl on another occasion, 'too minute to be seen without a microscope, but making the water unwholesome all the same.'

'I had to stop away to suit other people's convenience,' replies the prodigal, looking downward as she squeezes lemon juice upon her cutlet.

'How altered you must be!' says that odious Marion. 'Other people's convenience used to be the last thing you thought about. When is your luggage coming?'

'My luggage? I brought it with me.'

'I mean the rest of your luggage. The omnibus man brought in nothing but a carpet bag.'

'That is my luggage,' answers Sibyl, colouring to the roots of her hair. It is the first tinge of red that has warmed her delicate cheek since her arrival. 'I gave one of Mrs. Hazleton's servants that horrid old heavy trunk of mine.'

'But your dresses, your linen, you can't get them all into that carpet bag,' cries Marion, almost in a shriek. To be without variety of clothes is the last calamity she can conceive among the miseries of humanity.

'I have not one dress besides this. You can't have any notion how one's dresses wear out in a schoolroom—mischievous romping girls pulling one about all day long, ink spilt in every direction, candle-grease on all the tables, cups of tea perpetually turned over. I was determined to buy nothing during the last quarter, so I wore my old dresses till they were almost in rags, and gave them to my favourite housemaid when I came away.'

'I dare say it was an excellent plan,' says Marion, shrugging her thin shoulders, 'but you won't be in a condition to make a very good appearance in Redcastle till you've new things. People will expect you to bring down the London fashions too. They come out on the first of March, don't they?'

'What a pity Fate made you a gentleman's daughter Marion,' remarks Sibyl, with a cold sneer.

'You would have made such a capital milliner. Your soul would have been in your work.'

Dr. Faunthorpe sits back in his chair, reposeful, after that little bit of hot supper, which is not an every-day luxury. The small snappings and snarlings of his nieces hardly discompose him, he is so used to their sisterly talk. He is glad to have his handsome niece at home again, seated close to his chair, with all those familiar winning ways which have won her the first place in his heart; small gushings of loving speech, tender little smiles, gentle touches of a white fluttering hand—graces of manner which may mean very little, but are very sweet; petty Circean arts which have beguiled honest men to ruin and death before to-day.

'My darling,' he says presently, as the dark brown eyes smile upon him, brightening in the candlelight, 'I am so glad you have come back. It wasn't wise to stay away so long at the risk of vexing your uncle Trenchard: but I'll say no more about that. You are here, and all is well. You must go and see him to-morrow.'

'How can she,' exclaims Marion, 'in that gown?' pointing contemptuously to Sibyl's shabby alpaca, an alpaca which has seen much service, cockled by the rain, and frayed at the edges of the cuffs, and with that shrunken and dwindled appearance that ill-used garments are apt to assume.

'Pshaw, what does her gown matter? You can lend her a gown. You have gowns enough and to spare.'

'None that will fit Sibyl,' replies Marion, who prides herself on her superior height. 'She's welcome to wear one, but it 'll be two inches on the ground.'

'Can't she run a tuck, or cut a bit off?' argues uncle Robert.

'I shall have to give you a tonic, my love,' he adds, contemplating his elder niece anxiously, 'you are looking so fagged and worn.'

'I am at home with you, uncle Robert; that is the best tonic for me,' replies the girl fondly.

She is fond of him to-night. This shabby old home, which she abandoned in sheer discontent two years ago, seems very dear to her just now. It is a haven for a storm-beaten soul.

'You will have a better home than this, my pet, I hope, for the greater part of your time,' answers the doctor, cheerily. 'I've no doubt your uncle Trenchard will ask you to stay with him as he did Marion. She was quite three months at Lancaster Lodge, and is to go back again by and by. I look upon her as little more than a visitor here; but she is kind enough to make the best of her old uncle Robert's humdrum house.'

'It is a great relief to be here for a change, uncle,' answers Marion. 'I felt a fine lady at uncle Trenchard's, but I feel my own mistress here. If it wasn't for that tyrannical old Hester your house would be liberty hall; and I can forgive even Hester when she is in a good humour and makes hot cakes for breakfast.'

An hour later and uncle Robert has smoked his after-supper pipe, and the girls are in their bedroom, the old room which Sibyl knows so well, with its ridiculous flowered paper, low ceiling, and high painted dado, and curious brass safety bolts upon the door, as if burglars were a contingency to be provided against in that humble dwelling.

How well she remembers the long narrow chimneypiece, the basket-shaped grate with its wide hobs, the open-work brass fender, the painted four-post bedstead, drab and green, with skimpy dimity valance, and two starveling curtains. The rickety deal dressing-table, the streaky looking-glass, which used to reflect a fair girl's face wondering at its own beauty. The tall mahogany wardrobe that never was opened without threatening to topple over and wreak destruction on its violator. The scanty strips of bedside carpet, dull in colour and perplexing in pattern. How often she has pored and puzzled over those interwoven scrolls, in sheer idleness of thought. All things are unchanged. There are the wretched old ornaments on the mantelpiece. The pasteboard spill-boxes, adorned with faded gold paper, ancient works of art by fingers that have long been dust. The little black Wedgwood vases, urn-shaped, funereal. The hand screens with lithographs of Dr. Syntax pasted thereupon, and more paper gilding. The two black profile miniatures of dead and forgotten relatives.

It seems a dear old room somehow to Sibyl to-night, for it brings back the feelings of her innocent girlish days, when life, if it had few pleasures, had no cares. Now life means perplexity. Existence is an entanglement from which only some happy turn of fortune can extricate her.

She sits in her old place on the window-seat, and loosens the long twisted roll of rich brown hair, which falls over her bare shoulders like shining drapery.

'Goodness!' cries Marion, 'how skinny your shoulders have grown!'

'Have they?' says Sibyl, coolly, glancing downwards at a white neck and arms in which the bones are too sharply defined for beauty. 'Then we shall look more like sisters when we wear low dresses. Your shoulders were always skinny.'

Marion is silenced for the moment, and proceeds with the destruction of that elaborate edifice of hair and hair-pads which she constructs with infinite pains every morning, even though no one outside her own small family circle is likely to be gratified by the sight thereof. Marion's hair has been washed and doctored to the fashionable pre-

Raphaelite colour. It is thick and fluffy, and short, only just covering the points of her bony shoulders, and standing out round her head like an exaggerated nimbus. It is not bad hair altogether, and Marion thinks it one of her strong points, like her pre-Raphaelite figure, her long narrow foot, eighteen-inch waist, arched eyebrows, white teeth, and other small graces, some of which are the praiseworthy result of patient training.

'Do let me see your pretty things, Sibyl,' the younger sister exclaims presently, twisting one of her yellow tresses in and out of a hair-pin.

The elder looks up, startled out of a profound reverie.

'What pretty things?'

'Well, you must have something to show me—presents—things you have bought out of your salary. I'm sure I should have a lot to show out of forty pounds a year for two years. Glove-boxes, sealskin purses, card-cases, neck-ties, lace, gloves, and so on. I dare say that carpet bag is bursting with them.'

'It is doing nothing of the kind. I found that it was as much as I could do to dress myself decently for Mrs. Hazleton's parties and pay my laundress. Evening dresses are so unprofitable.'

'They must be, if you have *nothing* to show out of eighty pounds. I never thought you could bring yourself to wear such a dress as that alpaca thing,' adds Marion, pointing contemptuously to Sibyl's shabby gown hanging on a peg upon the door. 'I expected to see you come home quite a woman of fashion.'

'People who teach unruly children, and have to take them out walking in all weathers, have not much chance of being fashionably dressed,' answers Sibyl, wearily. 'Perhaps if you could contrive to put dress out of your mind for five minutes or so, Marion, we might have a little rational conversation.'

'Oh, very well; of course I know what an inferior mind mine is. You used to tell me so often enough. But you were once rather fond of talking about dress, and I thought, perhaps, if you've nothing to show me you might like to see my dresses—*not* home-made. Miss Eylett has made every one, and a pretty price she has charged me.'

Marion wrenches open the refractory door of the wardrobe, and displays three calico-shrouded garments, hanging in a row, like sheeted ghosts. One by one she brings forth these treasures, whisking off their covering, and displaying each to Sibyl with a dexterous twirl of her arm. A bronze brown silk; a pale gray, with elaborate ruchings of satin; a black silk, which stands on end for very richness of fabric.

'There,' she exclaims, swelling with pride, 'I wore the gray—new—at Colonel Stormont's.'

'At Colonel Stormont's! Is the world coming to an end, or what convulsion of nature brought you and the Stormonts together?"

'I was asked to dinner with uncle Trenchard.'

'And uncle Trenchard gave you the money to buy those dresses, of course.'

'Yes. He said, 'Well, my dear, I suppose you'll want a new gown;' and then he gave a heavy sigh, and took a bank note out of an old-fashioned red pocket-book, and then he looked at the note so long that I was afraid he was going to change his mind, and then he gave another sigh, deeper than the first, and handed me the note—a ten-pound note. I tried to kiss him the first time, but he didn't seem to like that, for he gave me a little peevish push, and said 'There, my dear, that 'll do.''

'Funny old man! How many ten-pound notes has he given you?'

'Four altogether. He always sighs just in the same way, as if every note was a wrench. He's inordinately rich, of course, but it seems to hurt him so to part with his money that I can't help thinking of that dreadful story of Douglas Jerrold's, "The Man made of Money," and fancying that uncle Trenchard is unrolling a bit of himself when he gives away a bank note.'

'It's only such people who get inordinately rich,' replies Sibyl, plaiting her long thick hair into one massive tail for the night. 'And how did you get on with uncle Trenchard, upon the whole?'

'Oh, very well indeed. It was so nice driving about in his new barouche, with a lovely pair of chestnuts, and feeling one's self looked up to by all Redcastle; and I had a splendid bedroom and dressing-room, and we dined at half-past seven every day, with two men waiting upon us. I used to feel afraid of them just at first, especially the butler, who looks the image of Mr. Groshen the banker, and that took away from the grandeur; but I soon got accustomed to them, and learned to speak to them in an offhand way, just like Mrs. Stormont.'

'Marion,' says Sibyl, earnestly, 'do you think uncle Trenchard intends to leave us his money?'

'Well, I should think he must leave it to us or to hospitals; and if we can manage to please him——'

'We must please him, Marion, and wind ourselves into his withered old heart somehow. It would be ridiculous, abominable, shameful, for the money to be left to hospitals when we want it so badly. It's no use to enjoy the luxuries of his house, to take a ten-pound note from him now and then. That kind of thing will only make poverty seem worse to us afterwards. We must have his fortune.'

Her eyes dilate and brighten, her lips tremble faintly as she leaves off speaking, and then her face changes in a moment, and tears run down her wan cheeks.

'Gracious, Sibyl!' cries Marion, rushing at her with a bottle of eau de Cologne and a towel, and dabbing her forehead with the perfume. 'I declare you're quite hysterical. Of course we must have his money—if we can get it. What has the fidgety old thing come home to England for except to make our acquaintance and leave us his fortune? He has as good as said so ever so many times.'

Marion's sisterly attentions check that hysterical attack of Sibyl's, and the two girls lie down side by side affectionately, after a brief formula in the way of evening prayer.

Deep in the chill spring night Sibyl's head tosses restlessly on the pillow, and the sleeper's lips murmur sorrowfully in troubled dreams,—

'Alex, Alex—don't be so cruel, Alex. Forgive—you know—your sake—yes, yes—as much as for my own.'

So pleads the sinner's vexed soul; self-excusing, self-accusing, even in dreams.

CHAPTER IX.

UNCLE TRENCHARD.

Stephen Trenchard paces his smooth gravel walk in the April sunshine, after tiffin, looking at the sparrows, and blackbirds, and thrushes disporting blithely on his velvet lawn, or hopping away into the shadow of evergreens—great masses of laurel and laurustinus, rhododendron and bay, which surround the smooth expanse of grass in a semicircular sweep.

Very perfect is the order of Mr. Trenchard's garden—not a yellow leaf on the laurels, not a daisy peeping pertly, silver-white, from the lawn, not a branch that grows awry. In the kitchen-garden yonder, far away behind the shrubbery, the fan-shaped fruit-trees look like geometrical patterns on the yellow brick walls. The apples and pears are all wired into exactest growth, and not a twig is allowed its own way. Mr. Trenchard is in his garden by six o'clock every morning, and his severe eye interrogates the smallest sprig of groundsel, and rebukes the very slugs that vie with him in early rising. Mr. Trenchard is not a master to be trifled with, and his gardeners know it. For every shilling he expends he will have twelve pennyworth of labour—nay, thirteen or fourteen pennyworth if he can get it, Woe be to the wretch who tries to put him off with elevenpence halfpenny worth of industry!

'I've had to work for my money,' says Mr. Trenchard, 'and I expect value for my money from other people.'

He walks briskly up and down, looking to the right and left with an eye bright and quick as a bird's, a small black eye, which looks the blacker for its whitened lashes. He is of middle height, very thin, very yellow. He has sharply cut features; nose thin, pointed, and aggressive-looking; lips also thin, and of a disagreeable pallid hue; eyebrows iron-gray, thick and bushy; brow narrow; perceptive ridge strongly marked, upper head receding; hair thick, short, and iron-gray, like the eyebrows, brushed into two sharp points, like a terrier's ears.

Mr. Trenchard wears nankeen waistcoat and trousers, very loose for his lean limbs, and a glossy black frock coat, also loose, a black satin scarf with a gold pin, and high shirt collars ; a double gold eye-glass dangles on his breast, a glass which he wears for show rather than use, but which intensifies the severity of his countenance when he reproves his gardeners, or lectures his butler.

He is a man who has toiled early and late, until the other day, when he took it into his head to give up his counting-house to a junior partner, and come back to England and enjoy the evening of his life at his ease. He has been a man of one idea all his days, and the single object of his existence has been the accumulation of money. The process of money-making, the honour and homage which the world renders the reputed millionaire—these have been so sweet to him that the question of what he is to do with his wealth has rarely presented itself seriously to his mind.

On his sixty-ninth birthday he awoke suddenly to the consciousness that whatever personal enjoyment he meant to have out of his wealth must be obtained within the next ten, twelve, or fifteen years. Even with his vigorous constitution he could hardly hope to live beyond the age of eighty-five. Forty years in India must take something out of a man, be he never so temperate, and abstemiousness has been one of Stephen Trenchard's virtues.

So at sixty-nine he said to himself, 'It is time for me to go back to England; let the world see what a position I have made for myself, and take all the good I can out of life.'

His seventieth birthday has not yet arrived, and he has built for his soul a lordly treasure-house, or in other words he has taken upon lease, decorated, and furnished Lancaster Lodge, one of the best houses in his father's native town of Redcastle: he has hired servants, purchased carriages and horses, and begun a plain-sailing English gentleman's life on a very liberal scale. The result so far has been eminently satisfactory His house to him a kingdom is, he rules his servants, indoor and outdoor, with a rod of iron, and feels himself a potentate.

Very pleasant to him is the incense which Redcastle offers to his wealth. People whose fathers and grandfathers snubbed or ignored his father, the struggling solicitor, bow down and worship the Anglo-Indian Plutocrat. He accepts their adoration with supreme coolness, and a quiet arrogance which his admirers extol as innate aristocracy of mind.

It has pleased him to permit his niece Marion Faunthorpe to bask in the sunshine of his favour. She is not handsome enough to charm his eye, which is critical in the matter of feminine beauty, nor is she clever enough to amuse him; but she is rather a pretty thing to have about his house, and she does very well for a listener when he is in the humour to tell his prosy old stories of dead and gone Calcutta scandals. She knows how to hold her tongue when he is inclined to be silent, is solicitous for his small comforts, quiet as a mouse when he takes his after-dinner nap. She behaves gracefully at table, neither eats nor drinks too much, looks stylish when fashionably dressed, moves about the house quietly, and is not altogether deficient in tact. He is content, therefore, to tolerate her as a frequent guest, but does not appreciate her warmly enough to ask her to take up her permanent abode with him.

He has made many inquiries about Sibyl, and has been vexed by her non-appearance. The Stormonts, the Groshens, and other notabilities have praised the absent girl's beauty, having found out all at once that a young person whose existence they never troubled themselves to acknowledge was the loveliest girl in Redcastle. 'Quite the belle of the place, I assure you, Mr. Trenchard,' says Mrs. Stormont.

'Indeed,' remarks Stephen Trenchard. 'She was invited out very much, I suppose?'

'Well, no, dear Mr. Trenchard, she was too young, you know—almost a child. And then your brother-in-law is so retiring. We could never have got him out of his shell.'

If there is one thing in that region of trifles outside the money market which Mr. Trenchard appreciates it is beauty in woman. Having heard his eldest niece so enthusiastically praised, he is particularly anxious to see her, ever so much the more anxious because her indifference has thwarted him.'

'She must be a queer kind of girl,' he tells himself, 'to hang back from a rich uncle, to prefer drudging as a governess to sponging upon me. Marion is glad enough to take all she can get, and would kneel down and kiss my shoe-string if I asked her. Her feelings are transparent enough. This other one must be something out of the common.'

A wonderful advantage this for Sibyl at starting; though it is an advantage she has gained accidentally.

The great lodge bell clangs out, while Mr. Trenchard paces up and down, and startles the respectable tranquillity of Above Bar with its clamour. He takes out his watch. Too early for a ceremonious visit. Mr. Trenchard walks round by the side windows of his large square mansion, and comes within view of the gate. Two ladies enter, both young and slim, both tall, but one rather shorter than the other. The taller gives a little eager cry and runs forward to him, the second advances more slowly.

'Dear uncle Stephen,' cries Marion, pursing up her lips to be kissed, an operation which uncle Stephen performs with a slightly reluctant air, 'Sibyl has come home quite unexpectedly,' Marion is always out of breath at the beginning of a visit, a pretty gushing way which some people call charming, 'and I thought I might bring her—to—see you—dear uncle John.'

'Thought you might bring her. Of course you might bring her. Haven't I been asking to see her ever since Christmas? So that is Sibyl, is it?' looking at the graceful figure lingering on the sunlit grass a few yards away from him. The bright face is flushed with palest rose, the dark full eyes are looking slily at him, the dark brown hair is burnished by the sun. A fair picture of peerless youth for crabbed age to admire.

'So that is Sibyl! Yes, she is very lovely. Those sycophants haven't exaggerated. Come here, my love, come to your old uncle. Naughty child, why did you stay away so long?'

He holds out his lean old arms, he folds her to his breast, he kisses her lovingly, paternally, as he has never yet kissed Marion, despite her affectionate blandishments.

'Well, I never!' Marion exclaims inwardly, standing a little aloof, and feeling that her reign is over.

CHAPTER X.

SIBYL TAKES THE LEAD.

THE favourable impression which Sibyl makes on her uncle Stephen Trenchard is a fact too obvious for diversity of opinion.

Marion reluctantly, sullenly even, admits that truth, with many sneers and inuendos about winning manners and hollow-heartedness.

'I have never laid myself out to please uncle Stephen as Sibyl lays herself out,' murmurs the injured maiden. 'I can't flatter people with my looks. I haven't Sibyl's caressing ways. I can't pretend more affection than I feel; and I must say that uncle Stephen's dry little jerky ways of speaking and looking at one are not calculated to develop affection.'

Thus argues Marion in the easy atmosphere of uncle Robert's every-day parlour. The girls are seated at supper with Dr. Faunthorpe, trifling with morsels of bread and cheese, after having dined with Mr. Trenchard.

'I did not find him hard or dry,' replies Sibyl. 'He seems really kind and affectionate, and I was grateful to him for his warm welcome. I don't know what you mean by my laying myself out to please him. I remembered that he was poor mamma's only brother, and our own flesh and blood, the uncle I had heard so much about years ago, and I was naturally touched by our meeting.'

'Ah,' says Marion, 'what an advantage it is for a woman to be able to cry when she likes! How *do* you manage it, Sib?'

'If the tears came into my eyes to-day it was because I am not very strong just now, Marion,' answers Sibyl, reddening. 'You are really the most horrid girl I ever met with.'

'However horrid I am, I am not double-faced,' replies the other, promptly. 'I should be ashamed to court uncle Trenchard if I were you, when I remember the things you've said about him.'

'What things?'

'What a convenient memory yours is! Haven't you said that you despised him for his meanness as a young man—that he won his way in the world by double dealing, by base flattery of his patron—that all your sympathy was with the young man he supplanted, Mr. Secretan?'

At that name Sibyl flushes crimson, and then grows ashy pale.

'Ah, I see you do remember,' cries Marion, triumphantly.

'Marion,' exclaims the mild little surgeon, with a rare flash of anger, 'I will not have your sister teased in this manner. How dare you accuse her of falsehood or hypocrisy? She has as good a right to Stephen Trenchard's favour as you have.'

'Yes, and to his fortune. Let her have it all,' cries Marion, tempted to go into hysterics, but thinking better of it immediately. 'She is to go and stay with him, and keep house for him, directly she can get her things ready, which, considering she came home without a rag, must take some time. She is to pay him a long visit. I'm nobody now.'

'My love, you have had your innings,' pleads the pacific doctor.

'Oh, of course, and just as I have got to understand his ways and know how to please him I am pushed aside.'

'My dear, his sense of justice will induce him to distribute his bounty fairly.'

'His sense of justice did not prevent his kissing Sibyl more affectionately than he has ever kissed me.'

'Mere fancy on your part, I have no doubt,' says the doctor.

After this little burst of temper Marion calms down and is tolerably placable. She even discusses her sister's outfit with some show of interest. Mr. Trenchard has given Sibyl five-and-twenty pounds. 'I suppose you are pretty well provided with cash, little one,' he said, just before she wished him good-night, 'an independent-minded young woman like you who goes out into the world to get her own living is sure to have a well-lined purse.'

Sibyl blushed, and owned that her purse had no lining at all.

'Ah, I see, sent help home to the old doctor,' muttered Mr. Trenchard, fortunately not loud enough for Marion to hear, or that sharp-tongued young person would inevitably have set him right. 'Well, well, very right, very proper.'

And then the crimson pocket-book was slowly brought forth, and Mr. Trenchard sighed a desponding sigh as he opened it, a sigh that was like a funeral gun for his departed bank notes. Sibyl went back to the dingy old house at the bottom of the town richer by five-and-twenty pounds than when she left it at mid-day.

The girls go out gaily enough next morning to Carmichael's, *the* haberdashery, linendrapery, and silk mercery establishment of Redcastle, to supply the void in Sibyl's wardrobe. Five-and-twenty pounds is not much for a young lady of large ideas, but Sibyl, schooled in the philosophy of small means, makes the most of that sum. She spends all her money at Carmichael's, and trusts to Providence and Stephen Trenchard for means to pay Miss Eylett for the making up of her dresses, and Mr. Korksoll, the bootmaker, for the equipment of her pretty little feet. It is astonishing how far away from the thoughts of Miss Eylett and Mr.

Korksoll seems the notion of payment now that Miss Faunthorpe's rich uncle has returned from the Indies. 'You are to send the things home to me at Lancaster Lodge,' says Sibyl, and that seems as good as paying for them.

Sibyl has asked for a week in which to prepare herself for this important visit, and that week is occupied in the stitching, hemming, sewing, felling, gathering, and trimming of underclothing — the fashion of ready-made linen not having yet vitiated the housewifely habits of Redcastle. The lower middle classes make their own garments, laboriously, and are proud of their toil; the upper classes employ school children, reduced widows, or virtuous orphans for the labour, and contrive thereby to exercise a good deal of patronage at a very small expenditure.

Sibyl revives considerably during this week of preparation. She manages to rest a good deal, other people taking the chief burden of getting her clothes made on their shoulders. She lies on the sofa in the shabby old parlour, staring idly at the white and yellow spring flowers that brighten the dull brown beds yonder in the familiar garden, the white pear blossoms tossing gaily in the light April wind, the jonquils peeping over the tall box border, the sword-shaped lily of the valley leaves cleaving the damp mould in the shadow of the bulging moss-grown wall, summer's harbinger in the shape of a butterfly skimming over the tender rose leaves. A dull old house verily—a limited prospect, this long strip of walled garden, yet sweet and soothing to one who has suffered. Sweet to lie at rest on the slumberous sofa, with no thought or care for the day, and with but vaguest thought of the morrow.

'If uncle Trenchard leaves me a fortune life will be made so easy,' Sibyl muses, her arms folded above her head, her eyes fixed dreamily on the waving white pear-bloom, 'I shall have but to call Alex back to me, and we can be happy together again, and taste the sweets of life again, as we did in our brief bright honeymoon. Poverty and love cannot live long together; but love with plenty of money—*that* means paradise.'

The future, dimly veiled though it is, seems very easy to her just now. She is elated by her uncle's evident admiration of her. She has made just the impression that she would have wished to make upon that fate-disposing relative. To follow up that impression will be simple enough. Has she not been told of her winning ways, of those small fascinations which make a woman powerful for good or evil? Has she not been always her uncle Robert's favourite, everybody's favourite, without effort on her own part? while Marion, painfully anxious to please, has been looked on rather as a nuisance, a vivacious nonenity of whom one might easily have too much.

Mr. Trenchard's carriage calls every afternoon, with its coachman and footman in respectable Puritan drab liveries, to take the two young ladies for an airing; Mr. Trenchard himself rarely making any use of the equipage, which he keeps rather as an appanage of his state than for pleasure or convenience. It is very agreeable to Sibyl to drive up the long street, with its ascending scale of social importance, from the shabby old houses at uncle Robert's end of the town to the stately stone mansions above Bar. Very agreeable to pass the *élite* whom Marion has just begun to know, and salutes with delighted becks and bows, but whom Sibyl surveys with a stony stare, affecting to have not the faintest notion who they are.

'That Faunthorpe girl is handsomer than ever,' says Colonel Stormont to his wife, whom he is driving in a pony carriage a size or two larger than a washing basket. 'She's pretty sure to come in for a tidy share of the old fellow's money, I should think. Not a bad match for Frederick.'

Frederick is the hope of the Stormonts—great at cricket, croquet, and athletics, fire brigade and volunteer rifle corps; a youth with very thin legs, and not much body, who wears a cutaway coat that just clears his hips, and has never been seen in an overcoat, or without a flower in his buttonhole.

'No family,' says Mrs. Stormont, pursing up her lips.

'Family be bothered!' remarks the colonel. 'Old Trenchard is rolling in money. What's the good of family? It won't keep a roof over your head, or pay the tax-gatherer. Commerce is the thing now-a-days. If Fred doesn't marry a rich woman pretty soon he'll have to go into commerce. You ought to take notice of those Faunthorpe girls.'

'I'll call next week,' replies Mrs. Stormont, obediently.

Sibyl's beauty is the talk of the town. Redcastle is suddenly awakened to the consciousness of loveliness that scarcely moved it to admiration two years ago, although the girl's beauty had then the bloom and freshness of unchastened youth. Perhaps she is really lovelier now. Sorrow and passion have passed there, and left the exalted look of an awakened soul, where there was before only girlish innocence, curious and wondering about a world of which it knew nothing. She has eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The mystery of life has been revealed to her. Be sure that Eve's beauty had a deeper meaning after she came out by the fatal gate where the angel with the flaming sword kept watch and ward.

The carriage comes at the week's end to fetch

Miss Faunthorpe and her belongings, to the tribulation of her young sister Jenny, who has had so much of Marion lately that she is deeply grieved to lose Sibyl.

'It will be ever so much worse for me when you're gone,' she says. 'You do stand up for a fellow sometimes. She'll be sending me upstairs for her handkerchief or her keys three times an hour, and making me crimp her hair till my fingers ache, and unpick her old dresses. I wish uncle Trenchard would let me go with you. I shouldn't cost much or be in his way. And now uncle Robert says I'm not to go to school any more, because it makes me vulgar, and Marion is to go on with my education. A nice education it will be! I don't believe she knows when William the Conqueror came over, or who invented potatoes.'

Sibyl tears herself from the lamenting damsel, kisses uncle Robert with a plaintive little look more expressive of gratitude than many a lengthy oration, and takes her place in the barouche, which becomes her as a frame does a picture, and seems as much her attribute as Juno's car to the goddess.

'Good-bye, Poverty,' she says to herself as the chestnuts throw up their fore-legs as if they were playing cup and ball, and dash off towards the Bar. 'It shall go hard with me if my name is not written in uncle Trenchard's will before long.'

CHAPTER XI.

HOW STEPHEN TRENCHARD FORGIVES.

THE new life at Lancaster Lodge suits Sibyl as if she had been created for no other purpose than to sit at her uncle's table, pour out his coffee, air his newspapers, play or sing to him in the evenings, and take her own pleasure for the rest of the day. Housekeeping is an easy burden in so well-ordered an establishment. The trained servants perform their duties, light for the most part, with mechanical precision. The service is too good to be forfeited by scamped work, or forgetfulness of the master's wishes. Stephen Trenchard has let his servants understand that he will have fullest value for his money, that there must be no talents stowed away in napkins in his household. He has contrived to inspire them with wholesome fear, and is served to the utmost of their power.

Sibyl is not afflicted with a genius for domestic matters. She remembers with a shudder those days in Dixon Street when she had to cater for a penniless husband, and make ninepence do the work of a shilling. She remembers this weary time, and reposes in her low easy chair, novel in hand, the garden smiling at her through the open French window, horses and carriages at her disposal, luxury around her, all Redcastle subjugated and more or less prostrated at her feet,—she keenly remembers the past, and deems her present life worthy some sacrifice, more especially as the present is made still brighter by vague hopes of happiness, and a reconciliation of all life's perplexities in the future.

She has her dark moments, naturally. What life is without shadow? There are moments when she thinks of one she has fondly loved—fondly loves still, perhaps, in some sealed chamber of her heart. There are hours in which she wonders, with remorseful wonder, how *he* fares whom she so ruthlessly abandoned.

'For his future advantage,' she tells herself; 'as

Mrs. Secretan I should have forfeited my uncle's fortune—as Miss Faunthorpe I may win it and share it with my husband.'

Established as Stephen Trenchard's favourite niece, Sibyl finds herself an object of unbounded interest and admiration with the *élite*. Mrs. Stormont, although overflowing with kindness, at first shows some disposition to patronize, but finding this eldest Miss Faunthorpe a young woman not amenable to patronage, changes her note and accepts Mr. Trenchard's niece as 'one of ourselves,' elected and chosen to sit in the high places of Redcastle.

'The girl has a wonderful air,' argues Mrs. Stormont, 'when you consider that she is totally without family.'

'Talking of family,' muses the colonel, 'I hope it's all right about old Trenchard's money, and that he hasn't left any niggers over in Calcutta to whom he may leave his fortune.'

'My dear Reginald, I'm surprised at you,' exclaims the lady, with a look of horror. 'Mr. Trenchard goes to church every Sunday, and is altogether a most correct person.'

'We don't know what he may have been in India, though,' says the colonel. 'He may have been a devil-worshipper, and danced an exaggerated highland fling at devil-dances; or a Mahometan, or a Brahmin, or a Thug. He seems to have plenty of money, and that's about all we know of him.'

Notwithstanding which ignorance as to Stephen Trenchard's antecedents the colonel and his wife continue to court and cherish him, arranging the nicest little dinners for him, with Mr. Groshen to sit opposite to him and discourse upon the money market; lavishing affection on Sibyl, inquiring kindly about the exiled Marion—as remote at the unvisited end of the town as if she had been removed to another hemisphere—and making themselves generally subservient and agreeable. Frederick Stormont, with his cutaway coat and legs like sticks of sealing wax, calls frequently at Lancaster Lodge, and is deeply interested in everything that interests Sibyl,—the flower-garden, the horses; he even volunteers to be interested in the poultry, but bottles his enthusiasm upon finding that Miss

Faunthorpe has no taste for Dorkings, Spaniards, or Cochin-Chinas.

There is a billiard-room at Lancaster Lodge, and Frederick is great at billiards. He drops in of an evening, and plays with Mr. Trenchard; he teaches Sibyl how to handle her cue, and discourses wisely on the theory of angles.

'Well, pretty one,' says Mr. Trenchard one night, when Fred has taken his departure with obvious reluctance, and uncle and niece are loitering by the billiard-table, Sibyl leaning over the green cloth to aim at the distant red, dressed in pale gray silk, with innumerable flounces, and knots of mauve ribbon dotted about among them, a masterpiece of Miss Eylett's art. 'Well, my pet, I think it's pretty clear what that young gentleman comes here for.'

'Billiards, I should think,' replies Sibyl, pushing her cue gently backwards and forwards as she meditates her aim. 'They have no table at the Stormonts, and it is cheaper for him to play here than at the "Coach and Horses."'

'The billiard-table is a very good excuse, my dear, but the gentleman comes to see you.'

'Poor thread-paper!' exclaims Sibyl, with a contemptuous laugh. 'For his own sake—if the thing can feel—I hope not.'

'Why, he'd be a very good match for you, wouldn't he?' asks her uncle, looking keenly at her from under his penthouse brows. 'These Stormonts are great people, the leaders of Redcastle society. You could hardly do better than marry into their set.'

'If I were likely ever to marry, which I'm not,' says Sibyl, pocketing her ball triumphantly off the red, 'I'd marry a *man*.'

'Never likely to marry! what do you mean by that?'

'Simply that I'm quite happy as I am, and that I mean to stop with you, and take care of you, please uncle Stephen, until you get tired of me.'

She has been living with her rich uncle nearly three months, and there is no more talk of her being a visitor at Lancaster Lodge. It is her home. Marion may come and go, but Sibyl remains. Stephen Trenchard cannot do without her.

'I shan't get tired of you in a hurry,' answers

Mr. Trenchard, 'but I think for your own sake you ought to marry when you get a good opportunity. I was only joking about that whipper-snapper, who walks about the place as if the very paving stones were his property, and couldn't give you change for a five-pound note if you asked him for it. He's not the man for you. But with your pretty face you are sure to find the right kind of man before long, a man with brains and money, and when you do I hope you'll be wise enough to marry him. It's all very well while I'm here to take care of you, but when I'm dead and gone——"

'When you are dead and gone I shall have your money, you dear old thing,' thinks Sibyl, but says not a word. She only goes to her uncle's side, and lays her face upon his shoulder, and gives him one of those gentle little caresses which Marion would as soon have offered to the Zoological Garden's tiger as to her Anglo-Indian uncle.

'Yes, pretty one, I should like to see you well married before my time comes,' says Stephen Trenchard.

'Now you know, uncle, that you are under a solemn agreement with me to live till you are ninety,' replies Sibyl, shaking her finger at him with playful menace.

She has grown very intimate with her uncle in these three months, her playing, her singing, her bright talk, her sparkling, vivacious little ways have won the old man's confidence. Stern to all the rest of the world, implacable in all his dealing with men, suspicious alike of equals and inferiors, tyrannical to his servants, he is yet wondrously gentle to Sibyl. His inherent meanness, his mental incapacity to give, cannot be wholly subjugated even by her influence, but what money he bestows upon her he gives less grudgingly than to Marion. He feels the loss of so many pounds a shade less keenly when Sibyl's pleasure is in question, and though he grumbles sorely at the costliness of a woman's toilet he is pleased to see his niece expensively dressed, and may in time come to regard her costume as one of the accessories of his own grandeur, like his stables or hothouses.

Rarely, despite the confidence that is established between them, has Mr. Trenchard talked to Sibyl of his past life, of his youth never. He tells her his prosy old stories of Calcutta society, of men with whom he has had commercial dealings, of clever frauds and chicaneries which he chuckles over as the *coups d'état* of the trading world, but of himself he speaks very little. Never, above all, has the fatal name of Secretan crossed his lips; and Sibyl is longing to find out the state of his feelings now, after this lapse of time, in relation to that name.

If he had learned, in the lapse of years, to forgive the man he injured and over-reached, if he had grown to feel some touch of remorseful pity for the supplanted son, what a happiness it would be to fall on her knees at his feet and confess the secret of her life, to be pardoned for her duplicity, set free from the toil and trouble of falsehood, able to call her proud young husband back to her side, and to begin life again, honest in the sight of man and at peace with God!

She is continually musing upon this question, and would give much for an opportunity of sounding her uncle's feelings. It comes one day unawares, and she has no longer need to speculate or wonder about Stephen Trenchard's sentiments upon the subject of an old enemy.

It is a drowsy July afternoon. The summer is at its hottest, and Mr. Trenchard and his niece are sitting on the lawn after that elaborate meal, half breakfast, half luncheon, which the Anglo-Indian calls tiffin. The lawn behind Lancaster Lodge is a delightful place on a warm summer day. Three or four old elms, a spreading cedar, a Spanish chestnut, and a couple of noble plane trees afford abundant shade. The grass is smooth as velvet. Garden chairs, low and luxurious, are dotted about under the trees. Newspapers, and Sibyl's work-basket, bestrew the light iron table. Changing lights and shadows flit and flicker among the leaves, and Stephen Trenchard's lean figure, stretched to its full length, reposes at ease on a bamboo reclining chair, a glass of potash water on one side of him, a cigar-case on the other.

Sibyl is reading to him out of yesterday's *Times*, when he interrupts her with a sudden sigh, which is almost a groan.

'What is the matter, uncle Stephen?'

'You had better leave off,—even your soft voice irritates me.'

'Your nervous headache not gone yet, uncle Stephen?'

'Gone! It's worse than ever. This English summer is more oppressive than Indian heat, or it seems so to me at any rate.'

Sibyl searches in the little work-basket lined with blue satin, fishes out a silver-stoppered scent-bottle, and is on her knees by her uncle's side in a moment, dabbing his yellow forehead with her handkerchief steeped in eau de Cologne.

'Thank you, my dear, that will do. I don't care about it.'

He gives her an impatient little push, as disapproving so much fuss, but not before she has disarranged one of those terrier-ear wisps of iron-gray hair, and been startled by a scar which disfigures the forehead beneath it, a long narrow seam, which crosses the temple diagonally just below the roots of the hair.

'Uncle Stephen, were you ever in battle?'

'Battle, child? What nonsense! Of course not.'

'Or in a mutiny—or anything? How did you get this dreadful scar?'

'From the foul blow of a scoundrel,' answers Stephen Trenchard, deadly pale. 'From the man who lamed me for life. Did you never hear your mother speak of Philip Secretan?'

'Yes, uncle Stephen, I have heard her say that he treated you very badly.'

'Oh, she owned as much, did she? The world in general would have it that I used him badly, that I had no right to the money his father left me—a paltry thirty thousand; that I ought to have stood on one side and said, "No, blood is thicker than water. You've been an idler and a profligate—a bad son, the business would have gone to wreck and ruin if it had been left to you to save it. I've toiled, I've slaved, I've planned and plotted, I've borne the heat and burden of the day; but still you are the son, and you've a right to come in at the eleventh hour and rob me of my just reward, simply because you are the son." That's what the world would have had me do, in the high and mighty justice it is so good at dealing out for other people, and so bad at yielding on its own account. Some went so far as to say that the will was forged, and I was the forger. Luckily for me, old Mr. Secretan had published his intention of disinheriting his son, and making me his heir, the year of the great Manchester failures, when his house tottered, and I had the luck to save it by a desperate stroke of business.'

'He was very fond of you, I suppose, this old Mr. Secretan?' asks Sibyl, breathlessly.

'Fond of me? Yes, perhaps as much as it was in his nature to be fond of anything, except money. He hated his son, knowing that he was a spendthrift, and would squander every shilling the old man had toiled for. He trusted me—he looked up to me. "If you were my son," he used to say, "I shouldn't be tortured by the thought that this business would go to ruin when I'm in my grave." The day he said that for the first time I made up my mind that I was to be his heir. Philip's follies and vices helped me, but my own patience and industry were the chief agents.'

'And there was a quarrel between you and Philip Secretan?' asks Sibyl, seated on the grass and plucking up little tufts of it nervously, as she watches her uncle's vindictive face with eager eyes, reading doom there.

'Yes, when the will had been read, and he knew the worst—he ought to have expected it if he had a grain of sense,—Philip Secretan followed me out into the grounds. His father's house was a few miles outside Manchester, a fine old place enough, but neglected,—the old man was too fond of money to spend much on house or gardens. Philip followed me to the back of the grounds, where there was a wild bit of shrubbery and a hollow that had once been a stone quarry, and which had been left, either because people didn't care about the expense of filling it, or because they fancied it was picturesque. In any case it was dangerous, and an abomination that ought to have been done away with. Well, I was close to the edge of this hollow—there being a short cut to the Manchester road just beyond it—when Philip overtook me. He didn't spare me, I can tell you, for, apart from the money question, there was an old sore between us. The girl he wanted to marry had done me the honour to prefer his father's confidential clerk. She was a sensible girl, and saw the point to which our lives were drifting. When he had called me reptile, and a few other equally agreeable names, finding that he couldn't sting me into retaliation by abuse of that kind, he came close up to me and struck me across the face with his open hand. "There, cur," he cried, "and let's see if that will warm your fish's blood into manly feeling." I had been in a burning rage all the time at his insolence, but had held myself in check, in pity for his disappointment, which was hard to bear, no doubt, richly as he had deserved it. I was a man, and the shame of a blow was too much even for my sluggish temper, trained to patience by long servitude. I closed with him, and we wrestled together on that path by the quarry. Now mark the cowardice of this fine gentleman, who boasted of his honour, and called me a sneak and reptile! He was twice my match in weight and size, three times my match in training, a practised athlete, a skilled boxer, every muscle developed by exercise. To use his force against mine was simply murder. I was the shuttlecock, and he the battledore. I had a confused sense of blows raining on my head, as from a Nasmyth's hammer, coloured sparks dancing before my eyes, fire shooting out of my brain, and then I was hurled bodily into the air, and fell crashing through the brushwood into the quarry. It seemed like falling from the highest cliff that breasts the Atlantic.'

'How dreadful!' says Sibyl, with a gasp.

'It was deep in the night when I awoke, and the stars were shining. I wondered where I was, and how I came to see the pole-star looking straight down at me. Pain came before memory, acute, agonizing pain, and then I knew that my leg had been shattered somehow. I lay in the quarry till past eight o'clock next morning, suffering indescribable torture. At last, however, some labourers heard my faint cries for help, found me, and carried me to the nearest roadside inn, whence I was conveyed to the Manchester Infirmary. Here I lay for five months—ths most miserable months of my life—while the fractured bones united. It was a compound fracture, and for some time I was threatened with amputation. When I rose from the hospital bed I was lame for life. The broken leg had contracted in the process of healing. Surgery had done its best for me, and had saved my leg; but surgery left me a cripple; for which lifelong injury I had to thank Philip Secretan. I had to thank him for something else too, for the girl who had pretended to love me chose this time for throwing me over, and making a better match.'

'And in those weary months, lying on your bed of pain, you learned to forgive your enemy,' suggests Sibyl, very gently.

'Learned to forgive him! Yes, if forgiveness means undying hatred; if forgiveness means the rankling memory of an unatonable wrong; if forgiveness means to remember him and curse him every time a change of wind brings back the old grinding pain in this crippled limb. If that means forgiveness, Philip Secretan and his race are forgiven.'

'His race?' falters Sibyl. 'You could feel no rancour against his children.'

'I could. I do,' answers the old man, vindictively. 'Let no viper of that blood cross my path. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." There's Scripture for you. I believe in that good old heathen creed one reads of in Greek legends, of an accursed race. Of Philip Secretan's after career I know little or nothing. He had the devil's luck as well as his own, and married a woman with money, soon after his father's death, but I never heard what became of him. He may be living or dead. If he lives, let him keep out of my way. If he has left children, my dearest hope is that they are penniless, homeless, street Arabs, whose playground is the gutter, whose ultimate destiny is the gallows.'

'Uncle, for mercy's sake——'

'My curse light on him and his seed to the third generation! There, child, don't cry. You should have known better than to tempt me to talk of Philip Secretan.'

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE, THEN, HAD HOPE OF RICHER STORE.

After that summer day under the plane trees, Sibyl utters the name of Secretan no more. Hope of relenting on her uncle's part there is none. If Alexis could forgive the man who in his version of the story came basely between father and son to cheat the son of his heritage, and tricked the lover out of his mistress, Stephen Trenchard's stubborn soul would still remain unsoftened. Reconciliation between these two was impossible. To retain her uncle's favour, and inherit a portion of his wealth, Sibyl must keep the secret of her marriage. A painful part to play even for a mind not untrained in deceit; but a necessary part, Sibyl tells herself. A difficult game, but for a stake well worth the winning. She has no exact measure of her uncle's possessions. He has never talked to her of his investments, or told her his income, but she has a fixed idea that his wealth is almost without limit, that, like the Rothschilds or the Duke of Westminster, he could scarcely state the sum-total of his riches if he were asked for exact figures. His fortune is a rolling mass of gold, she supposes, which grows larger at every turn, like a snowball. The respect she sees paid to him by the elect of Redcastle establishes her in this conviction of Stephen Trenchard's importance, for she knows that in this case importance can only mean money.

Lancaster Lodge is one of those handsomely finished, solidly built houses which adorn the outskirts of every country town, and are like temples dedicated to the genius of commonplace ; houses in which the butler's pantry has been as carefully considered as the drawing-room, and in which my lady's boudoir is just as unlovely as John Thomas's attic under the leads. All the principal rooms are large and square and lofty. The passages are broad and straight. The staircase is well proportioned, ventilated and lighted to perfection. Impossible to find fault with a house which, as the house agent proudly puts it, possesses all the requirements for a gentleman's family. Equally impossible to feel the slightest interest in a mansion which neither awes by its splendour nor attracts by its eccentricity, nor charms by the lowlier graces of homeliness and simplicity. A coffin descending that mathematical staircase would lose its awfulness in the pervading atmosphere of commonplace. A cradle in any of those rooms would seem to have lost its way, and wandered into a desert, where baby-life could not endure. No sadly sweet fancies of domestic joys that are no more entwine themselves about this dwelling of Stephen Trenchard's. It looks like what it is—an old bachelor's house,—and Mr. Trenchard could hardly have chosen a habitation more completely in harmony with his own character.

The Redcastle upholsterer, a man whose stock in trade appears to consist of two easy chairs and a sideboard—but who can do great things at a push,—has furnished Lancaster Lodge with appropriate splendour. All is solid and grandiose; dark crimson draperies—velvet in the dining-room and library, satin brocade in the drawing-room—subdue the garish light and give a sombre grandeur to the rooms. Heavy oak furniture, thickest Turkey and Persian carpets ; varied spoil of carved black wood, ivory, porcelain, and Bombay inlaid work, which Mr. Trenchard has brought home with him from India,—everywhere the evidence of wealth.

To Sibyl the house seems simply perfect. Its luxury, its soft silent splendour, contrast so pleasantly with the humble homeliness of her uncle Robert's old-fashioned, low-ceiled rooms ; the stealthy-footed footman, who spends so much of his time looking at nothing particular out of the hall window, that he grows sedentary in his habits, and fancies he has disease of the heart; the ponderous butler in his glossy black suit and irreproachable white tie ; the smart maid-servants, in crisp starched cambric, tight-waisted, prim, supercilious, as if Mr. Trenchard's importance as the richest man in Redcastle shed reflected glory upon them. The household has an air of quiet dignity which impresses Sibyl wonderfully. Her soul reposes itself in this land of fatness. She looks back at her life in Dixon Street, its one room, its manifold privations, veritable starvation hovering near like the wan spectre of approaching doom, and the change seems too wonderful for anything but a dream. Does she think of the husband who shared her poverty, whom she abandoned to endure misfortune alone, deserted in the darkest hour of their wedded life? When does she not think of him? Memory and regret are interwoven with the fabric of her life. She consoles herself—justifies her desertion of Alexis—by the idea that life must have been made easy to him by their separation. As a married man with a helpless wife to provide for, he was like a vessel waterlogged; relieved of that burden, he is the same ship free to sail for any port in quest of fortune.

One night, in the solitude of her prettily furnished bedroom, all rose-coloured chintz and shining maple, furnished especially for a young lady's occupation at Mr. Trenchard's order, Sibyl takes out an insignificant paper-covered book from among her most sacred possessions, and opens it with a hand that trembles a little as she sits alone in the lamplight. It is like opening the grave of the past. That little sixpenny book is the diary she kept at Mrs. Hazleton's—her brief love story.

Tearfully, sorrowfully, she reads that record of her first and only love, the story of a time when in singleness of mind and simplicity she surrendered her heart to its conquerer.

'I love him, I love him, I love him,' she reads, almost blinded by tears. She remembers the gush of passionate feeling with which those foolish words were written. 'And one little year after I wrote that line I deserted him,' she says to herself, wondering at her own hardness of heart.

'What a fool I must have been when I wrote this book!' This is her verdict as she closes the volume; yet she feels as if it were the best and brightest part of her life in which those foolish pages were written, and that she was happier in those days than she is now, although she has become a personage in Redcastle.

She looks round her room wonderingly, glancing at the maple wardrobe which contains so many pretty dresses, such a treasury of ribbons and lace, and the frivolities women love.

'Would I exchange all this, and the hope of a fortune from my uncle, for the dismal second-floor schoolroom at Mrs. Hazleton's, and the freshness and sweetness of first love?' she asks herself; and for a moment it seems to her that could a good fairy give her back the days that are no more, she would be a gainer by the exchange.

If she could know that her husband was safe and well, that he had prospered since she left him, or that things had gone tolerably well with him, she might feel more at ease than she does. But she knows nothing of what has happened to him since the beginning of the year, when he was seen at Redcastle, a dismal apparition; and of this appearance of his she only hears by chance, a few days after her perusal of her diary, from no less a person than her younger sister Jane, otherwise Jenny.

Sibyl is spending the day with her uncle Robert, a visit which ranks as a condescension now that she is on intimate terms with the Stormonts, the Groshens, Dr. Mitsand, and, in a word, the *élite* of Redcastle. She is received by her indulgent old uncle with all honour. Hester prepares an extra good dinner, a dainty little loin of veal, and a currie of yesterday's roast mutton, followed by the unwonted extravagance of a tart and a pudding. Marion sees this relaxation of the economic bow with certain sniffings and bridlings, indicative of suppressed indignation.

'I never knew such a time-server as Hester,' she remarks, as she surveys the table, laid as for a feast, a clean tablecloth in the middle of the week, almonds and raisins for dessert, an altogether ruinous expenditure. 'She didn't make this fuss about you when you were at home, but now she pays her court to the heiress elect.'

'No more an heiress elect than you or Jenny, I should imagine,' replies Sibyl, lightly. 'I think it is pretty clear that uncle Trenchard means to leave his money among us, though he has not said as much.'

'Yes, and the lion's share to you, no doubt, though he has known me longest,' says Marion, snappishly.

'A precious sight of his money I'm likely to get, when he never so much as asks me to go and see him,' observes Jenny, whereupon both sisters swoop down upon her in denunciation of such a noun of quantity as 'a precious sight.'

'Where do you pick up your language, child?' cries Sibyl. 'Not in the streets surely, since Marion teaches you, and you have no occasion to be running about.'

'A fat lot Marion teaches me!' says the incorrigible child. 'She nags at me for an hour and a half by the kitchen clock every morning, and calls that education.'

'Pray, in what edition of Lindley Murray do you find the verb "to nag"?' demands Marion, with the air of a pedagogue.

'It's as good a verb as any other. I nag, thou naggest, he or she nags, generally she; or take it in Latin if you like, Nago, nagas, nagat, nagamus, nagatis, nagant; first conjugation; perfect, nagavi.'

'I'm afraid that Jane has rather an unruly temper,' remarks Dr. Faunthorpe, mildly.

'Oh, of course it's Jane. Marion is never aggravating. *You* don't find me unruly, do you, uncle?' Jane adds coaxingly, as she sidles up to the gentle, easy-tempered little doctor, who has gone through life placidly bearing other people's burdens, and has never murmured against a destiny that has weighted him with three orphan nieces.

Later in the afternoon Sibyl and Jane are alone together in the garden, Marion having lost her temper at croquet, and left them to themselves.

The little bit of grass upon which they play is not many sizes bigger than the billiard-table at Lancaster House. The balls and mallets are in the last stage of shabbiness, and chipped into icosahedrons.

'You must both come to afternoon tea to-morrow, if it's fine, and play croquet on uncle Trenchard's lawn,' says Sibyl, condescendingly, as if she were inviting them to her own house. Perhaps this patronizing invitation has something to do with Marion's loss of temper five minutes afterwards, when Jenny sends her ball into a distant cabbage bed. The sources of bad humour are more often complex than simple.

It is a warm September afternoon, one of those days in which people incline to sitting in gardens rather than walking on dusty high roads. Sibyl sits on the grass as she was wont to do three years ago, before she was anybody's heiress. Jenny sprawls, with an appalling display of legs and boots and rusty bootlaces, at her sister's side.

'Now, Sibyl' she says, eagerly, 'tell us about the parties you go to.'

'Pray, who is your companion?' inquires Sibyl, with a contemptuous droop of her heavy eyelids. 'I see no one here but yourself.'

'I don't know what you mean,' says Jane, staring.

'No more do I when you say tell *us*.'

'Oh, lor, as if it mattered! You're as bad as Marion. Now do be nice, Sib, for once in a way, and tell me what it's like going to the Stormonts. Only fancy you're being asked there ever so many times; and to think how often I've passed their door when we've been out for walks, and the inside of it has seemed as far off as heaven; further, indeed, for they say we're sure to go to heaven if we're good, but we're not sure of going to the Stormonts unless we're rich. What's it like, Sib? do tell.'

'Well, they live in a house, as you know, since you've seen the outside of it, and they eat their dinner at a table, just as we do, and they are rather stupid after dinner, and the ladies go up into the drawing-room and talk about other people who are not there, and a little about the minster, and the clergymen, and the schools, and look at one another's dresses. I can see them count the flounces on my dress sometimes, and actually take the pattern of it under my nose, which I consider an impertinence.'

'Is it nice going to grand dinners?' asks Jane, breathlessly.

'Yes, I suppose so. It's rather a mild kind of enjoyment. It doesn't quicken one's pulse by a single throb. It isn't like riding a good horse, or seeing a race, or hearing a great singer, or even getting a good break at billiards. There's no excitement, no elation; but one feels one is doing the right kind of thing, that this is what one was born for.'

'Are the dinners nice?' inquires Jenny, licking her lips gluttonously.

'They are very grand,' replies Sibyl. 'I don't know that I should care about *vol-au-vent à la Financière*, or *petites timbales de gibier* for a continuance, and with so many made dishes one has the idea that one is eating up all the cold meat that has accumulated in the last week; and one gets rather tired of seeing saddle of mutton and boiled fowls everywhere,—for whether you call fowls *poulets à la Béchamelle*, or *chapons en demi-deuil*, they are very much the same birds.'

'Capons in half-mourning! That is funny. Do you know what *my* favourite dinner is, Sib? Bullock's heart with veal stuffing and currant jelly. Do you ever have *that* at Colonel Stormont's?'

'You must never mention such a dish, Jenny. It's positively revolting.'

'But you used to like it, and liver and bacon, and sheep's head with parsley and butter. But never mind your dinners, tell me about your beaux. Marion says that young Mr. Stormont was in love with her until you lured him away.'

'Marion is a —— fool.'

'You must have lots of lovers now that you go into such grand society, Sib, because you are the beauty of the family, you know. We all know that, and that's what makes Marion so cross sometimes. "I'm nobody," she says; and then she squeezes her waist in another half-inch, and fancies she has got the better of you. She's awfully proud of her figure, you know.'

'You mustn't talk disrespectfully of your elder sister, Jenny,' remonstrates Sibyl, yawning. The plebeian two o'clock dinner and the game of croquet in the afternoon sun have made her sleepy.

'Then I won't talk of her at all. Tell me about your lovers, Sib, that's a deal more interesting.'

'Nonsense, child! I have no lovers.'

'But you had one once. Yes, I saw somebody who was in love with you once, though he must have gone down in the world dreadfully since you had had anything to say to him, for he looked little better than a beggar when I saw him.'

Sibyl has sunk into a reclining attitude, with half-closed eyes, and is dropping into a gentle doze, but at this speech of Jane's she starts into a sitting posture again, and looks intently at her sister, very pale.

'What do you mean?' she cries. 'What was he like? Where did you see him? When? Tell me all about it this instant.'

'Ah, I see you know the person I speak of. You wouldn't be in such a way if you didn't. How pale you are, Sibyl! Do you care for him very much?'

'Will you tell me what you are talking about, child?' exclaims Sibyl, passionately.

Jane begins her story with deliberation and importance.

'I have always kept it a secret,' she prefaces, 'feeling that it might get you into a row with uncle and Marion, and I've wanted to tell you about it ever since you came home, but have never had a chance of being alone with you till this afternoon.'

'For goodness' sake go on. What was the man like?'

'Very handsome and noble-looking, though his clothes were dreadfully shabby. His coat was shabbier than uncle's, snuff and all, but it looked as if it had been a more gentlemanly coat in its day; and as for his poor boots, it made my heart bleed to see them. I wanted to give him my new shilling, one uncle Robert gave me on Christmas Day, for it was the day after New Year's Day that I saw the man, you know——'

'I know nothing. Never mind how you came by the shilling.'

'But he pushed away my hand gently, and said, "No, my dear, I'm not a beggar, though I dare say I look like one."'

'Poor fellow,' sighs Sibyl.

'Oh, Sibyl, I did feel so ashamed of myself for having offered him that shilling,—ever so much ashameder than he did,' adds Jenny, coining a comparative in the impetuosity of her speech.

'Can't you tell me about it straight—beginning at the beginning?' demands Sibyl, impatiently.

'Well, it was the day after New Year's Day. I detest New Year's Day. Church in the morning, and dulness in the afternoon—and I came into the garden to have a run all by myself, and to get out of Marion's way. It was a little after four, between the lights, you know, and a wretchedly cold afternoon. Well, you know the lane at the bottom of the garden——'

'Of course,' says Sibyl, with an involuntary glance in that direction. Beyond the plot of lucerne there is a low wall, and on the other side of the wall an accommodation road leading to a neighbouring farm.

'Well, he was there, looking over the wall, and he beckoned to me. I was afraid at first, thinking he might be a robber, but as I had nothing but my hoop to be robbed of I went up to the wall to look at him, and then I saw somehow in a moment that he was a gentleman, though I am sure you wouldn't have given twopence for his hat.'

'What did he say?'

'He asked me if my name was Faunthorpe, and then if I had a sister called Sibyl. "Yes," says I, "but she's away in London." "Where?" says he. "At Mrs. Hazleton's, Lowther Street, Eccleston Square," says I. "Is that all you know about her?" says he. "What more can I know about her?" says I. "She's very happy, I believe, and she's very well,—at least, she was when uncle heard from her last." "When was that?" says he. "About three weeks ago," says I. And then he sighed heavily, and he looked so white and tired that I pitied him with all my heart.'

'Poor fellow,' sighed Sibyl again.

'Ah, you do know him then?' cries Jane.

'How can I tell? He didn't tell you his name, I suppose.'

'Not a bit of it. He asked me a lot of questions about you. Did we expect you home soon? and so on, but I could tell him no more than I had told him at first. You were at Mrs. Hazleton's, and you were likely to stay there, for anything I knew. I didn't know that uncle Robert wanted you to come home at that time. They don't take *me* into their confidence.'

'You didn't mention uncle Trenchard?' asks Sibyl, with a scared look.

'Of course not; why should I go and mention our rich uncle to a wandering tramp that might go and steal his plate? At least, I don't mean that, for when once I had heard the poor thing speak it never entered my mind that he was anything but a gentleman. Who is he, Sibyl? Do tell me. Some one who fell in love with you in London; saw you go in by Mrs. Hazleton's carriage perhaps, and fell in love with you at first sight, and followed you about everywhere, and neglected his profession, and went to the dogs for your sake. Do tell me all about him.'

'How do I know who the man was?' says Sibyl, absently. There is no shadow of doubt in her mind. This wanderer was her husband, who had come to Redcastle in quest of her.

'I'll describe him if you like. I can see him before me at this moment. He is tall and dark, with rather large features, regular features, but striking, not one of those straight-nosed waxwork faces one sees in a hairdresser's shop. His lower lip projects a little, which gives him rather a scornful look till he smiles, and then he has the kindest expression. "Dear child," he said, and patted my shoulder so kindly, "you are just a little like your sister when you look up at me as you are looking now." You won't think that a compliment, I know, Sib, but he said it. Who is he, Sib? Do tell me.'

'I have not the remotest idea,' replies Sibyl, with provoking indifference.

'Come now, you wouldn't have been so agitated when I spoke about him if you hadn't guessed who he was.'

'I was not agitated,' says Sibyl, pretending to yawn.

'Oh, very well, if you like to tell crammers, of course I can't help it. My experience of elder sisters is that they may break all the commandments with impunity, and drive a coach and six through the Catechism. I think they wash their hands of Christianity when they're confirmed.'

'Jane, you are not only blasphemous, but you're extremely impertinent to *me*,' exclaims Sibyl.

'Well, if that's all I get for keeping your secrets!'

'That was wise of you at any rate, Jenny,' says Sibyl, making haste to relent. 'Marion would have made no end of mischief out of nothing. Never mind the man in the lane, dear. We'll forget all about him. He was some foolish fellow, no doubt. And if you'd like a new frock for Sunday, Jenny, you shall have that pretty checked peach-coloured silk of mine, and I'll get Miss Eylett to make it up for you.'

'Oh you dear!' cries Jane, crimsoning with rapture. 'That lovely peach-colour! How sweet I shall look, if—' with a doubtful look at her well-worn boots—" if uncle Robert will only give me new boots.'

'If he won't, I know somebody else who will. And, Jenny, if you could contrive to keep your hair a little smoother, and your hands a shade cleaner, you wouldn't be the worst-looking child in Redcastle,' says Sibyl, drawing her younger sister towards her, and bestowing a condescending kiss upon that young person's forehead. 'Now mind when you come to afternoon tea with me to-morrow you make yourself look as nice as ever you can.'

'I'll do my best, Sib, but I know I shall feel shabby before those stuck-up servants. When is uncle Trenchard going to have Marion to stay with him again, do you think?'

'I don't know. That's a question I can't ask him, you see.'

'I suppose not; but Marion's rather cut up at his not inviting her, you know. I say, Sib, I fancy Marion's nose is out of joint since you've come home.'

Sibyl smiles—a self-satisfied smile. She is very sure of her uncle's preference—knows quite well that he considers Marion something of a simpleton, and not a little of a bore.

'It isn't my fault, Jenny, if uncle Trenchard likes me best,' she says, complacently.

The sisters go in to tea after this, Jenny with her arm round Sibyl's waist.

'I say, Sib, when you're married, and have a beautiful house of your own, you'll have me to stay with you sometimes, won't you? I'll be good, and keep my hair tidy.'

'I mean never to marry, Jane; at least, not during uncle Trenchard's lifetime. I mean to keep his house for him, always.'

'But he may live to be ninety—twenty years to come,—and a nice old woman you'd be by that time. Who'd have you then? You ought to marry now, Sib, while you have such advantages; that's what uncle Robert says. Do be married soon, that's a dear, and let me be your bridesmaid—in white muslin over pink silk. Is Frederick Stormont very nice?'

'He's absolutely detestable,' replies Sibyl, and immediately without rhyme or reason bursts into tears. She is thinking of the fond and faithful husband who came to Redcastle in quest of her, and departed hopeless.

Where is he? what is he doing? how has he fared since that bleak January afternoon when he found his journey had been useless? Starving, perhaps; or worse—dead. Slain by his own hand in some dark hour of despair. Has she not reason to fear the worst of one she left without hope?

Three days later, by the help of her old ally, Mrs. Hazleton's housemaid, Jane Dimond, Sibyl contrives to insert the following advertisement in the second column of the *Times* supplement:—

'S. S. to Alexis.—You are not forgotten. In all I do I am faithful to you and your interests. I look forward to our reunion. Wait and hope, as I do. Write and tell me where you are, and what you are doing.—Address, S. S., Post Office, Hale Street, Pimlico.'

This advertisement is inserted three times, and the housemaid inquires diligently at the Hale Street

Post Office during the following fortnight for a letter addressed to S. S. No such letter comes, and Sibyl's vague fears of evil are intensified by this ominous silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SWEETS OF LIFE.

NOT a word has been said by Mr. Trenchard as to his testamentary intentions in reference to his three nieces, but in the mind of Redcastle it is an established fact that Sibyl is to inherit the bulk of her uncle's property. The other two girls will get something, no doubt, Mrs. Stormont remarks obligingly to Mrs. Groshen, the banker's wife, as those two ladies take their afternoon tea together, ceremoniously, in the Stormont drawing-room, a spacious apartment with a good deal of white paneling, gold moulding, and looking-glass, and not much besides in the way of furniture, a barren tract of Brussels carpet, with an islet here and there in the shape of sofa, ottoman, or coffee-table.

'The other two girls will get something, of course—two hundred a year each, perhaps: and a very nice income too, for young women not likely to marry. But mark my words, Mrs. Groshen, Sibyl is the heiress. Mr. Trenchard positively doats upon her.'

'Do you think her pretty?' asked the banker's wife, languidly. She has been esteemed a beauty in her time, on the strength of an aquiline nose and a large pale blue eye, and she does not particularly approve of these new lights.

'Well, yes, decidedly pretty—in her peculiar style. Features rather too sharp, perhaps, and a sad want of colour.' The Miss Stormonts rejoice in vivid complexions. 'But she has fine eyes.'

'Yes, fine eyes,' assents Mrs. Groshen.

'Though I cannot say I like their expression.

'No more do I,' says Mrs. Groshen, warmly.

'Perhaps the nicest thing about her is her manner. She has really charming manners.'

'Ye-es, very agreeable manners,' drawls Mrs. Groshen.

'If they were not so painfully artificial.'

'That's the very thing that struck me,' says Mrs. Groshen, brightening.

The banker's wife rustles home in her silk attire, and tells Mr. Groshen at dinner how the Stormonts are trying their uttermost to catch Mr. Trenchard's niece for their empty-headed son Frederick.

'This Mr. Trenchard is very rich, I suppose?' she says, interrogatively.

'Enormously. I wish he'd keep an account with us,' replies the banker.

Sibyl accepts all the homage Redcastle can offer her, with a tranquillity which raises her not a little in the estimation of the *élite*. She takes Mrs. Stormont's somewhat oppressive kindness as a matter of course, and is unawed by the splendour of the Groshens' dinner-table, which for plate, china, glass, floral decoration, and hothouse fruit, takes precedence of other tables in Redcastle.

'I don't pretend to do things as Mrs. Groshen does,' the Redcastle matrons inform one another apologetically. 'We can't all be bankers.'

Mrs Stormont volunteers her services in escorting Sibyl to concerts, and other local entertainments which a man of Mr. Trenchard's age may not care to patronize. Stephen Trenchard is quite willing that Sibyl should take advantage of these friendly offers, but, to his surprise, and perhaps gratification, the girl refuses.

'I am very fond of music, uncle Trenchard,' she says, 'but I shall not go out of an evening without you. That would be a pretty way of keeping you company.'

'But, my dear, there is some difference between seventy and twenty. Crabbed age and youth cannot dwell together; or if they do, youth must have a holiday now and then.'

'You are not crabbed, and I am very happy with you,' answers Sibyl.

'Flatterer,' exclaims Stephen Trenchard, not the less pleased.

'Artful hussy,' thinks Mrs. Stormont, and by-and-by in the course of that cutting and wounding which passes for conversation in Redcastle, that lady informs Mrs. Groshen that Sibyl Faunthorpe is one of the deepest girls it was ever her fate to encounter.

'She'll have that old man's money, my dear, every sixpence,' says Mrs. Stormont, emphatically.

'Then your Fred ought to have her.'

'Why, you see, my dear, these Faunthorpes are people of no family.'

'You mean that he has asked her and been refused,' remarks Mrs. Groshen, astutely.

'I don't think a Stormont is likely to find himself rejected by a parish doctor's niece,' replies the colonel's wife, with suppressed indignation. 'As to Mr. Trenchard's fortune, it is nothing to boast of after all. It has all come from trade.'

This is a thrust at the banking business.

'I fancy that is the source of most people's money now-a-days,' returns Mrs. Groshen, blandly. 'Professional men seldom seem to have much.'

Hereupon the two ladies, having indulged in a few friendly passes on their own account, return to the slaughter of the absent, and kiss each other affectionately at parting.

Sibyl's dissipations are therefore, by her own desire, confined to those festivities to which Mr. Trenchard is bidden, and which take the dignified and substantive form of dinners. No one could think of inviting the master of Lancaster Lodge to 'come in' in the evening. Dinners of first quality, A1 at Lloyd's, are those to which Mr. Trenchard is bidden, and very splendid are the banquets with which at longish intervals he gratifies his friends in return. Wonderful is the regard which Redcastle has for Mr. Trenchard, and its eagerness to win and retain his friendship. It is not to be supposed that the *élite* have any expectation of profiting in a direct manner by his wealth. They have none. But they like to adorn their table with a rich man. They like to put him forward as one of their best friends, and to know that less privileged people are smitten with envy. They invite him very much for the same reason that they buy costly fruit out of season, and waxen blossoms from the hothouse instead of homely roses ripened in the sun. He reflects honour and glory upon themselves. It is a distinction to be on intimate terms with so much money. Mr. Trenchard's Redcastle friends brag about his wealth as if it were their own, smack their lips as they tell each other his income, and that he has never less than fifty thousand at call, in case some sudden opportunity for a stroke of business should crop up in Calcutta. Has Stephen Trenchard told his new friends the amount of his income, or the sum he keeps uninvested? Hardly, for he is the most reticent of men as to his own affairs. But Redcastle has a knack of evolving facts about other people's business out of its inner consciousness.

A year has slipped away, unawares almost it seems to Sibyl, despite lurking pangs of remorse, silent hours given to regret. Life at Lancaster Lodge is such an easy thing. It is so pleasant to have everything one desires, to be praised and petted, and invited here, there, and everywhere, and to refuse the most flattering invitations upon the last fashionable absurdity in note-paper. Pleasant, in a word, to be Miss Faunthorpe of Lancaster Lodge, instead of Miss Faunthorpe of nowhere. There is something of the lotus-eater's dreamy idlesse assuredly in this reposeful existence at Lancaster Lodge.

Conscience has been lapped to sleep before the year is out, and Sibyl has persuaded herself that Alexis Secretan has carved his way to independence somehow or other, and is getting on very well indeed in some distant quarter of the globe, whence he will doubtless return by some happy conjuncture of events soon after uncle Trenchard's death, which calamity in the course of nature will come to pass in a few years.

'And then we shall both be amply rewarded for the sacrifice we have made in this separation,' muses Sibyl, as if the separation had been a voluntary one on her husband's side as well as her own.

Mr. Trenchard takes life tolerably easily considering that he has his own way in everything, an indulgence which acts as an irritant upon some dispositions. He is feared and obeyed in his own house, flattered and caressed out of it. His servants work for him as no other man's servants work, and obey, and tremble at his footstep. He accepts all that Redcastle can give him, dines out a good deal among the *élite*, tells his prosy old Indian stories again and again, to listeners who always laugh in the right places. He enjoys the homage offered to his wealth, and chuckles over the weakness of his flatterers as he drives home with his niece.

'If my name were in the *Gazette* next Wednesday morning, before Wednesday night I should be friendless,' he says; 'and the people we have dined with this evening would be gloating over my downfall.'

'Oh, uncle! they would be sorry, surely,' exclaims Sibyl, more for the sake of conversation than from any belief in the good-heartedness of her friends.

'Sorry that they had been taken in—that they had mistaken a poor man for a rich one, no doubt; but for me, not a whit. Society in a place like Redcastle is made up on the co-operative system—is a club to which a man is admitted upon certain understood conditions. The first of these is that he should be well off.'

'Luckily you are never likely to put our friends to the test,' says Sibyl.

'Of course not. And in the meanwhile there's no harm in calling them friends. One name does as well as another when you are talking of unrealities.'

The year has gone, and Marion has not been asked to stay with her uncle Trenchard—a fact which she resents bitterly, and ascribes to double-dealing on the part of Sibyl. She has been at Lancaster Lodge tolerably often, but only as Sibyl's visitor, and although she accepts all Sibyl's invitations, it is almost unbearable to be invited and patronized by a sister. Sibyl has established herself as Mr. Trenchard's adopted daughter. He coolly declares that she suits him better than Marion, and that she is to keep his house till she marries.

'I suppose I must have made myself very disagreeable to him in the three months I spent here,' remarks Marion one bright April afternoon, digging her croquet ball into the ground with misused energy. She has come to spend the afternoon with Sibyl.

'No, dear, I don't think it was so bad as that,' replies Sibyl, graciously; 'but you didn't succeed in making yourself agreeable to him.'

'I know I made myself a perfect slave,' complains the injured Marion; 'toasting his newspapers, and running for his slippers, and peeling walnuts for him till my fingers were black. I'm sure I don't know what he wants—the nasty old thing!'

'Now really, Marion, I can't consent to hear the best of uncles called names,—on his own croquet lawn, too.'

'Very much the best of uncles for you, but give me uncle Robert.'

'Well, my dear, you've got him. Haven't I left you in undisturbed possession of our paternal uncle?'

'All I can say is that it is positive injustice, murmurs Marion, as the game proceeds.

Frederick Stormont strolls in five minutes afterwards and takes a mallet, whereupon the sisters become all smiles and graciousness. He goes in to afternoon tea with them, and they sit on the crimson brocade sofas sipping orange pekoe out of Indian teacups, waited on by the most accomplished of footmen, and discussing the petty gossip of Above and Below Bar. An empty life assuredly. But it is pleasant to sit in a handsome room, almost an indoor garden in its abundance of choicest flowers, a sunlit lawn beyond the open windows; pleasant to be dressed in the last fashion; pleasant to be admired, even though the eyes of the admirer are pale in hue and porcine in shape; pleasant to feel that in life's eager race one has shot ever so far ahead of one's younger sister. So, at least, feels Sibyl as she accepts Mr. Stormont's vapid homage, and allows Marion to be useful as her foil.

Mrs. Groshen is strictly incorrect in her conjecture about this young man's wooing. Frederick has not been rejected by Mr. Trenchard's niece. He has not yet ventured to propose to her, and when pushed hard upon the subject by his father, he always asks for time.

'I think she likes me,' he says complacently, 'but, by Jove, you know it doesn't do for a man to hurry that kind of thing; you're so impatient, you see, you want a fellow to round the Cape before he's got across the Bay of Biscay. Miss Faunthorpe has a good deal of reserve about her and that kind of thing, and she's just the sort of girl to throw over a fellow who proposed to her before she'd quite made up her mind about liking him.'

'She's a long time making up her mind about you,' replies the colonel, pensively. 'And upon my word, you know, Fred, if you don't marry a woman with money you'll have to do something for yourself. Things can't go on like this much longer. By Jove, you know, you'll have to emigrate. I don't see that there's anything you could do in England, You're too old for the army, or the navy, or the civil service; you'll have to try the colonies.'

'I might do something, kangaroo-shooting in New Zealand,' says Frederick, meditatively.

'Hang it, sir! a man can't get his livin' kangaroo-shootin',' roars the colonel. 'You'd better marry Trenchard's niece.'

'She's a very jolly girl,' says Fred, vaguely. He would have called Electra or Antigone, Joan of Arc or Mary Stuart, jolly. He knows no higher praise to bestow on the woman of his choice.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAKING READY FOR VICTORY.

The fair spring days flit by; the violets and primroses, bluebells and wind-flowers, fade in the copses, unseen, unknown, uncared for, save by a few peasant children; the white blossoms of the pears—the pinky bloom of the apples—have drifted away on the light west winds like summer snow; ferns uncurl their tender fronds in thicket and lane, and stand up to hail the summer. The cuckoo's last call dies in the silence of the wood, the skylark's clear carol rings out above the tall green corn. Summer has come—summer has come—and the little children of Redcastle—the children of the commonality, at least—wander far afield under the midday sun, and lose themselves in distant woods, and drain the cup of summer joys to the dregs. The children of the *élite* regard summer as a period in which they wear starched frocks, find French and

German grammar more than usually oppressive, and entertain hopes of going to the sea-side.

Sibyl welcomes June and the roses with a languid greeting. That smooth, easy life has begun to pall a little on Stephen Trenchard's niece. Despite its pleasantness, it is at best a monotonous existence, and youth's eager spirit revolts against monotony. Not willingly would Sibyl confess even to herself that she is tired of Lancaster Lodge and Redcastle dinner parties, Redcastle compliments, Redcastle life altogether.

She wishes that her uncle would extend the circle of his acquaintance, yet is obliged to admit that it would not be easy for him to do so at Redcastle. The county people have not called upon Mr. Trenchard. Aloof in their fastnesses among the hills and moors, the county people refuse to bow to the golden calf, hug themselves in their social privileges, and do not recognise the fact of an old gentleman having made money in India as a reason why they should go out of the beaten track to take notice of him. From their lofty region of territorial estate they look down with an equal disdain upon professional and commercial people who live in a town and call five acres of garden and paddock *land*. Stephen Trenchard's million is nothing to them, or if they think of his wealth at all, it is with resentment, as a sign of the times, and an irrefutable proof that England is going to the dogs.

Perhaps it is the very fact of the county people's exclusiveness which makes Sibyl regard them with a certain amount of interest. Those big broad-shouldered young men she has seen ride past her window in the hunting season, sitting their horses much more easily than Frederick Stormont sits his chair, glorious in 'pink' and buckskins, loud voiced, large whiskered, seem to her of a different race from young Groshen, or young Stormont, or Dr. Mitsand's pale-faced spectacled son, whose manly vigour has degenerated into brains, Mr. Twells the curate, or Mr. Jewson the lawyer. To her fancy there is something grand about these sons of the soil, a rough nobility, an outspoken contempt for the petty conventionalities which constitute the small despotism of Redcastle society. *Cæsar est supra grammaticam.* The county people are above good manners—that is to say, good manners as understood in Redcastle.

The town and the county meet occasionally in the hunting-field, where the county looks on with a smile at some of the town's feats in horsemanship, leaves the town three fields behind for the most part, and now and then deposits the town in ditches or hangs it out to dry on a stiff bullfinch.

Twice in every year town and county meet on equal ground. Redcastle, small and obscure as it is in the eyes of the outer world, boasts a racecourse, and as pretty a course in a small way as any in England. Less than a mile out of the town, on that broad open common known as Redcastle Woods, gleam the white posts of the course, and the white walls of the stand, a permanent and substantial building. Redcastle has its spring and summer meeting, two days on each occasion—and just the merriest two days in that part of the world. Granted that horses of much weight or *prestige* rarely appear at Redcastle; the fact only leaves the ground open to the horses of the local aristocracy, and makes the races so much the more interesting to Redcastle itself.

Sibyl has never seen a race in her life, and it was not without a struggle that she declined Mrs. Stormont's invitation to join her party at the spring meeting. Now comes the summer meeting, and another invitation from the leader of Redcastle society.

'Rose and Violet,' the dear girls are named after those favourite flowers—five feet ten each of them, and with the complexions of cookmaids;—'Rose and Violet will be so disappointed if you refuse to join our party, my dear Sibyl. Of course I say nothing of Fred's feelings.'

'Why don't you go with them, child?' asks Mr. Trenchard, when Sibyl reads him the letter, laughing as she reads.

'I don't care for pleasures that you cannot share, uncle.'

'Nonsense, my dear! I could share this if I liked. For my part, I could never understand what people could see in a race, unless as a hazardous investment with the possibility of enormous returns.

I can fancy a bookman enjoying the races in a business-like way; but for people to sit in their carriages to look on at other people winning or losing, and call it pleasure, that passes my comprehension.'

'I should like to see a race for once in my life,' says Sibyl, languishing for any novel sensation that may ruffle the mill-pond of her existence.

'Then write and accept Mrs. Stormont's invitation, my dear.'

'You won't think me unkind for going without you?'

'I should think you much more unkind if you wanted me to go with you.'

So it is settled. Sibyl tells her dear Mrs. Stormont that she is charmed to accept her kind invitation, and summons Miss Eylett to immediate counsel. She has ever so many pretty dresses in her wardrobe, but she must have something new for this occasion, with a view to crushing dear Violet and Rose by the exhibition of a dress they have never seen before. The invitation has been given a week before the races, so there is time for preparation. The council is a solemn one, and by the intensity of Sibyl's desire to look her best may be measured her hatred of dear Rose and Violet.

'Now mind, Miss Eylett,' she begins, after she has looked through *Le Follet* and pronounced all the illustrations 'hideous,' 'I must have nothing that can possibly look like a shopkeeper's wife's Sunday gown—no flaming pink or blue that people can see a mile off——'

'Mauve, or a rich voylet, now,' suggests Miss Eylett, in her persuasive voice.

'My dear Eylett, mauve and violet are the colours vulgar people choose when they want to be genteel.'

'A sweet French grey.'

'Give me a housemaid's afternoon gown at once.'

'A cinnamon brown.'

'A doctor's wife's dinner dress. No, I must have some pale indistinct colour softened with a cloud of India muslin. A dress which looks nothing particular at a distance, but which is fit for a princess when you come to look into it. Mr.

Trenchard gave me an embroidered Indian muslin, which will be just the thing, over a pale maize corded silk,—you know the shade I mean, straw-colour shot with apricot.'

Sibyl opens a huge camphor chest, in which she keeps her treasures, and displays a muslin dress fine as a cobweb, and covered with embroidery.

'Exquisite!' exclaims Miss Eylett; 'what taste you have, Miss Faunthorpe!'

She would have been just as enthusiastic had Sibyl suggested pickled-cabbage colour, picked out with pea-green.

'And you must make me a bonnet exactly to match the dress.'

'Of course, Miss Faunthorpe, I'll go round to Carmichael's at once, and see if they've got the colour; and if they haven't I'll take the three o'clock train to Krampston.'

This question settled, Sibyl feels easy in her mind, and looks forward to next week with pleasure. The summer is at its height—mid July,—and a delicious July, warm, dry, ripening roses and ripening corn, swelling the peaches on the wall, and reddening the apples in the orchard—all the land basking in the sun, and Redcastle High Street a place to look at blinkingly between two and five in the afternoon, and a burning ploughshare to walk upon. Marion and Jenny come toiling along the sun-baked pavement in the very hottest hour of the afternoon to visit their prosperous sister,—Jane splendid in the peach-coloured silk and new boots, and a hat that is too small for her large round head, with its thick brown hair in curls that no application of the hair-brush will reduce from their disorder to the smoothness of civilization.

Sibyl receives her sisters languidly, under the plane trees, exhausted by her interview with Miss Eylett. Marion's temper is not improved by the warm walk, or by the labour of getting Jenny up in a style befitting Lancaster Lodge.

'There never was such a troublesome child,' she complains as she sinks into a rustic arm-chair, conscious that her face is the colour of a boiled lobster, while Sibyl, in cream-coloured Indian silk, and a turquoise blue sash, is looking divinely pale.

'Look at her legs. She has grown out of that frock already: and as for ever keeping her decently dressed, I defy you. There's the print of a slice of bread and butter on the front breadth, and smears of marmalade all over the sleeves, though she's only worn the frock on Sundays.'

'Let her wear it every day and wear it out,' says Sibyl, generously; 'she shall have another for best.'

'Oh, you dear!' cries Jenny; 'but if you knew what a life Marion leads me when I've a good frock on you might think it a greater charity never to give me one.'

'You ungrateful minx,' exclaims Marion, 'didn't I stand half an hour this broiling afternoon doing your hair?'

'Pulling it, you mean,' responds Jenny. 'If you'd combed it with a hay-fork and brushed it with a bush harrow you couldn't have hurt me more.'

'There's gratitude!' ejaculates Marion, pointing to the offender.

'*My* idea of gratitude is thankfulness for things we want,' reasons Jenny, who is good at argument. 'I didn't want my hair pulled.'

'Well, Sibyl,' says Marion, 'is uncle Trenchard. going to the races?'

Everybody thinks and talks of the races at this time. It is the one subject of conversation in Redcastle. A rare thing for Redcastle to have so much as one subject of conversation; as a rule, the town contrives to be conversational about nothing.

'No, uncle Trenchard hates races. I am going with the Stormonts.'

'Indeed! I thought you wouldn't go anywhere without your uncle.'

'No more I would in an ordinary way, but I felt a kind of interest in the races. One hears so much of them.'

'I feel a kind of interest in them too,' says Marion, with an injured air. 'I've been hearing about Redcastle races ever since I left school, and yet, living so near, I've never seen them. Uncle Robert has got a pony that would take us, but he has not got the spirit. You might have asked uncle

Trenchard to let you take us all in his barouche. I dare say uncle Robert would have gone if you'd taken him.'

Sibyl looks doubtful as to the delight of such a family party.

'I've accepted Mrs. Stormont's invitation, you see,' she replies, apologetically.

'Oh yes, of course, catch you putting yourself out of the way for anybody! Another girl in your position might have thought of her poor relations. What are you going to wear?'

Sibyl describes the costume which she and Miss Eylett have arranged that morning. Poor Marion listens in an agony of envy.

'What a lot of money uncle Trenchard must give you!' she exclaims.

'No, he doesn't give me much, but he allows me to keep an account at Carmichael's.'

'Well,' sighs Marion, 'I would give a year of my life to go to the races this day week.'

'What a pity our lives are not transferable like railway stock,' says Sibyl, airily. She is not deeply moved by Marion's piteous condition. Her mind is occupied with a prophetic vision of her triumphs next Wednesday. She will see and be seen by the county. That idea is more inspiring than the prospect of a day spent with the Stormonts, whom she knows by heart, or even the privilege of beholding Mrs. Groshen's raiment, which is sure to be resplendent and of the very latest fashion, however hideous in the abstract and individually unbecoming that fashion may be.

CHAPTER XV.

TOWN AND COUNTY.

A CURIOUS thing happens that evening after dinner. It is Mr. Trenchard's habit to read the daily papers at his ease in the drawing-room as soon as he has withdrawn from the dinner-table; or, if he is idly disposed, Sibyl reads to him, and beguiles him into placid slumber. This evening he reads the papers for himself, beginning, as usual, with the *Times*, which he studies profoundly. He sits in his easy chair by one open window. Sibyl yawns over a novel at another. Rather dreary these summer evenings at Lancaster Lodge, when twilight's purple shadows rise ghost-like among the trees on the lawn, and the gates are closed upon the outer world. Welcome even such commonplace interruption as the advent of Frederick Stormont, and an adjournment to the billiard-room.

Sibyl looks up from her book with a start at a sudden movement of her uncle's. What was that half-stifled exclamation which sounded so like an oath? Stephen Trenchard is standing up, with the paper crumpled in his right hand, staring blankly at his niece. She goes to him, looks at him in frightened interrogation; but he neither sees nor hears her. Is this some kind of seizure,—epileptic, paralytic? She thinks so, tremblingly, for a moment, before Mr. Trenchard's keen black eyes resume their power of vision and look into hers.

'Dearest uncle, what is the matter?'

'Nothing that need concern you, Sibyl. A friend, an old friend of mine, dead in India. The announcement of his death shocked me, that's all. I ought not to have been surprised. At my age a man must expect old friends to drop off. Go back to your book, my dear. There is no reason for you to be agitated.'

Sibyl looks wonderingly at the paper in her uncle's hand. It is not the supplement. That, with its births, marriages, and deaths, lies on the carpet unopened. She remembers that the deaths of distinguished people are sometimes recorded in the body of the paper, and this friend of her uncle's is doubtless a person worthy of an obituary paragraph.

'I am so sorry,' she says sympathetically.

'So am I. But it was to be expected. Go back to your book, child.'

Perceiving that sympathy is not required, Sibyl returns to her seat by the distant window. Marion would have hung about her uncle for a quarter of an hour bemoaning his loss and offering stale crumbs of consolation.

Sibyl hears the door shut ten minutes afterwards, and looking up, sees that Stephen Trenchard has vanished. She hastens to look for the newspapers, eager to find out all she can about her uncle's departed friend; but Mr. Trenchard has taken the papers with him, and when she searches for them next day in his study and in other likely places, they are not to be found. Nor does Mr. Trenchard reappear that evening. The butler brings Sibyl a message at tea-time to the effect that his master has letters to write, and will take tea in his study. So that particular infusion of hyson with which Mr. Trenchard is in the habit of irritating his nerves is carried to the study on a salver, and Sibyl is left to spend her evening alone.

There are times, on just such an evening as this, when memory recalls that one room in Dixon Street, Chelsea, and his company whose easy temper and natural gaiety of heart could brighten deepest poverty with an occasional ray of light.

'If I could have borne poverty as well as he, we might have struggled on together to the end,' she thinks, with a touch of remorse. 'But then what a pity it would have been to lose uncle Trenchard's fortune! How ghastly pale he looked to-night, poor dear man!'

Mr. Trenchard seems a little out of sorts for the next few days, not quite so keen and far-seeing, so exacting or high-handed in his household as it is his wont to be. He has a preoccupied air, a thoughtful look, and is evidently much concerned by the loss of that departed friend whose name he has not mentioned.

Sibyl wonders at this a little, never having heard Mr. Trenchard talk of any intimate friend in India.

He has told numerous stories of Calcutta society, of trade and chicanery in that palatial city ; but of friendship, of intimate congenial companions, he has not breathed a word. Nor in the year and a half of his residence at Redcastle has a single Anglo-Indian acquaintance visited him. Impossible to imagine a man more independent of friendship, yet he seems cut to the quick by the death of this distant friend, and is slow to recover his equanimity.

Mrs. Stormont calls about three days before the races, and finds Mr. Trenchard and his niece on the lawn, the gentleman asleep, or meditating, his countenance shrouded by an orange-coloured bandanna, like a new veiled prophet, the lady working point lace at the rate of a stitch a minute.

The kind soul has come to talk about the races.

'I wish you could be induced to join us, dear Mr. Trenchard.'

'You're very good, my dear madam, but the thing is not in my way. I hardly know whether a horse should have four legs or six. If you were to show me a six-legged animal I doubt if I should remark the redundancy.'

'And yet you have the finest carriage horses in Redcastle.'

'Because I did not choose them myself, madam.'

'I shall call for you at half-past twelve, my dear,' says Mrs. Stormont, turning to Sibyl. 'Fred is going to ride. I shall hire Shrub's landau and pair. My poor dear ponies would be frightened to death on a racecourse.'

Shrub is the proprietor of the George Hotel and livery stables, and has the honour of ministering to the *élite* on all state occasions.

'Why hire Shrub's landau when my barouche is at your service?' asks Mr. Trenchard. 'I shall be glad to give that idle coachman of mine a day's work.'

'My dear Mr. Trenchard, you are too kind. Such an idea never entered my head.'

'Odd if it didn't,' thinks Sibyl, 'when you are always making use of the carriage in some way or other.'

The Stormonts have allowed Sibyl to drive them a good deal during the last few months, to the infinite relief of the ponies and the buck-basket, both of which institutions are slightly the worse for wear. You may get fifteen years' good work out of a pony, but when he approaches his majority his powers are apt to wane.

Mrs. Stormont allows herself to be entreated, and finally yields gracefully, and with an airy coquetry, but only on condition that Mr. Trenchard shall dine with them on the race day. This he promises, with certain reservations.

'If I feel myself up to the mark, I'll come,' he says, 'but I have not been particularly well lately.'

'Uncle Trenchard has lost an old friend in India,' explains Sibyl, and seeing her uncle's impatient frown, is sorry she has made the remark.

'Indeed!' exclaims Mrs. Stormont, thirsting for information. 'In the civil service or the army? The colonel has so many old Indian friends.'

'My friend was neither in the civil service nor the army,' says Mr. Trenchard, and says no more.

Mrs. Stormont is disappointed, but she has got the carriage, which was the object of her visit, so she drifts off into the usual Redcastle talk. 'Have you seen the Groshens lately?' and 'Did you hear that Dr. Mitsand has been very ill?' and so on; with which interesting discourse she beguiles the next half-hour.

The race day comes with the calendar, and a glorious day, hot blue sky, roads white with dust, grass brown and slippery, bad for the horses, opine the learned in such matters. The grand stand is gleaming in the sun, flags are flying, the town is all astir, flies are driving to and fro between station and racecourse, with visitors from Krampston, people who smell of commerce and dockyard, oakum and tar, a rough lot in the estimation of genteel Redcastle. At half-past twelve the Trenchard barouche calls for Mrs. Stormont and her two daughters; Sibyl has taken her place in it already. She wishes to sit with her back to the horses, but this Mrs. Stormont will not allow, and after a little polite skirmishing she takes her place next that lady, the Miss Stormonts side by side on the opposite seat, which they fill to overflowing. On the way to the course the ladies have time for a silent review of each other's apparel. Rose and Violet are in washed muslins and home-made bonnets. Mrs. Stormont wears her dove-coloured moire, which is an institution in Redcastle, and as well known as the town clock.

'Here comes Mrs. Groshen's carriage. I suppose she is going to crush us with some new finery,' says Rose, with a venomous look at the maize silk and India muslin.

'I hope it will be in a little better taste than usual,' remarks Violet, who is of a more calculating temper than her sister. 'What lovely embroidery that is of yours, Sibyl! I can't help noticing it.'

Frederick joins the party presently, on a brute of a gray horse, whose ownership he participates with young Jewson, the lawyer's son. The joint animal, having very little mouth to speak of at the best, and being ridden on opposite principles by his two proprietors, is about as manageable as a watering-place donkey. Frank Jewson, who is the better equestrian of the co-owners, boasts that he rides with his knees. Fred Stormont hangs on by the reins, and makes the wretched quadruped's mouth his fulcrum. He is not happy on horseback himself, or the cause of happiness to his steed, and the joint proprietorship is an extravagance which he can ill afford. But he feels that the horse gives him social status, and endures bravely. The beast is consistent, and starting with a fixed idea that the sooner he gets back to his stables the better for his own well-being, tugs desperately at every turning in the endeavour to make a short cut home, and if confronted in his straight course with any object which he dislikes, wheels sharp round, and sets off at a lively trot stable-wards. The first half-hour of Mr. Stormont's ride is one prolonged tussle with the gray, which, in the pride of their hearts, the joint proprietors have christened Flying Dutchman.

'The Dutchman is awfully fresh to-day, Fred,' remonstrates Rose, when the gray has backed into the landau half a dozen times, in his efforts to go up every side street or alley; 'hadn't you better try him on the curb?'

'I think I am riding him on the curb,' says Fred, looking doubtfully at his reins, which are in an inextricable muddle, 'the fact is Jewson spoils his mouth. Yah, you beast, what's the matter now ?' as the Dutchman, taking objection to a very small child in a white pinafore, gathers all his legs together, collapses, and scrambles frantically across the street, with a noise as of a detachment of cavalry.

'Is that a fit ?' asks Sibyl, when Mr. Trenchard's horses have recovered from their consternation at this manœuvre.

'No, it's only a shy. He cannot stand a perambulator.'

'Nor a woman in a red cloak, nor a baker's cart, nor a washing-basket, nor a chimney sweep, nor a heap of stones, nor an organ,' says Rose, indignantly ; 'I never knew such a beast. He'll have your life some day, Fred, I feel convinced.'

'He's more than half thoroughbred,' says Frederick, leaning over to pat the animal's neck—an attention which the Dutchman resents by a sudden slouch forward, and a furious shake of his head, whereby he all but precipitates Fred upon the paving stones.

'Are you fond of riding ?' asks Sibyl, as the horseman pulls himself together, scarlet after his struggles with his steed, and settles into a jolting trot beside the barouche.

'P—p—passion—ate—ly,' says Fred, the syllables jerked out of him piecemeal by the gray.

'But that seems rather an uncomfortable horse to ride.'

'He's a little fidgety in the town, but he's splendid when you get him on the turf. You should see him in a stretching gallop across the grass.'

Mr. Stormont omits to state that in these stretching gallops he is entirely at the Dutchman's mercy, and suffers abject terror.

They turn out of the Market-place presently, into a broad lane leading to the woods—a lane in which there are nice old houses on one side, and orchards on the other, and at the top of this lane they come out upon that open stretch of greensward, with a hollow full of hazel bushes, hawthorn, and blackberry here and there, which is dignified with the name of Redcastle Woods.

Yonder towers the stand, white in the sunshine, flags blue, red, and yellow, fluttering gaily, the oval course on the southern side of a slope, and a fringe of carriages and smartly dressed people —a simple rustic racecourse, with its local gentry, and sprinkling of citizens from busy Krampston.

The Stormont barouche takes its position among the great ones of the land, and by good luck finds itself in the very lap of the county. The magnates of Redcastle are six carriages off, Mrs. Groshen becking and nodding at her friends, gorgeously arrayed in a brilliant mauve silk, which glistens in the sun, and a bonnet loaded with feathers.

There are many greetings between Mrs. Stormont and her neighbours—for the Stormonts occupy the border line of Redcastle society, and are graciously regarded by the county families. Loud 'how d'ye do's' are uttered by the occupants of a tall coach next door to the barouche, two young men and two young women are seated on the box—the men in homespun tweed, the women in brown holland and brown straw hats. Two grooms in dark green, and mahogany tops, are in attendance.

'Are we going to have some good racing, Sir Wilford?' asks Mrs. Stormont, radiant at finding herself in such good company, and Mrs. Groshen afar off like Dives. The bigger of the gray men answers in a loud good natured voice, dropping lightly down from his perch, and coming close to the barouche.

'Not much fun, I'm afraid; wretched lot of leather platers. Going to speculate, Miss Stormont? Better put something on Stagheen for the Cup. Sure to win.'

He addresses himself to the fair Rose, shaking hands with her the while, but he looks at Sibyl. That delicate clear-cut face, with its brown eyes, is strange to him, and in a place where everybody knows everybody else that is enough to awaken interest.

Sibyl remembers him as one of the hunters she has seen ride past the walls of Lancaster Lodge, clad in weather-stained scarlet.

He is tall—six feet two—broad shouldered, with the frame of an athlete. He has shaggy brown hair, shaggy brown moustache, good-humoured gray eyes, a common-place nose, a good, firm mouth, and strong square chin, large hands in well-worn tan gloves.

'Sir Wilford Cardonnel, Miss Faunthorpe,' says Mrs. Stormont, graciously.

Sir Wilford takes off his hat and looks pleased, but is little wiser than before. This name of Faunthorpe means nothing for him.

'Fond of racing?' he inquires, following up the introduction.

'This is the first time I was ever at a race,' replies Sibyl. 'But I think I shall enjoy it very much.

'Then you don't belong to this part of the country, I suppose? We Yorkshire folks are always going to races.'

'Yes, I have lived in Redcastle ever since—or almost ever since, I left school.'

'And have never come to the races?'

'I couldn't get anybody to bring me,' replies Sibyl, frankly. 'Neither of my uncles care about races. Good gracious!'

This exclamation is evoked by a most startling apparition on the other side of the course, exactly opposite the barouche. A shabby old pony carriage, quite the most ancient vehicle of its kind in Redcastle, a dilapidated, unkempt pony, with his nose in a nose-bag, an elderly gentleman in a discoloured white hat, a young woman in pink muslin, and a girl of nondescript appearance, in short petticoats, standing on the back seat of the pony carriage, in order the better to survey the brilliant scene, and making a positively awful exhibition of her legs.

These are uncle Robert, Marion, and Jenny. Sibyl beholds them with unmitigated consternation. She will be obliged to acknowledge them presently, to avow her relationship to that wretched chaise, that odious pony, in the face of the county families, nay, the highest and mightiest of the high and mighty—the Cardonnels of the How, people she has heard the Stormonts talk about with as much reverence as if they had the prosperity of the county in their keeping, wound up the sun like a clock, and turned on the rain from a tap in their custody.

'This is Marion's doing,' thinks Sibyl, indignantly. 'That girl is capable of anything. To think that they must needs come and perch themselves exactly opposite us!'

There seems deliberate malice in the act. A few minutes ago there was only empty space where the pony-chaise stands now. The chaise has been placed there since the arrival of the barouche.

Dr. Faunthorpe surveys his niece's party mildly through his spectacles; Marion nods and kisses her hand; but Sibyl, once having seen her danger, looks every way except towards the doctor's chaise. Jenny, more energetic than her elders, is not to be baffled. Finding nods and hand-kissing unnoticed, she raises her shrill young voice, and screams, 'Sibyl, Sibyl! Look this way, Sibyl.'

'Who is that leggy child calling?' asks Sir Wilford, looking at Jenny through his race-glass, which brings her to the end of his nose. 'What an excitable young person! And what a funny party! A little old man in spectacles and a white hat, a tall young woman with ginger hair, and that leggy child dancing about upon the cushions. And what a pony! The very one Noah had in the ark, I should think."

Sibyl grows crimson. Can she acknowledge her kith and kin after this? While she hesitates, Mrs.

Stormont raises her gold-rimmed binoculars, and scrutinizes the opposite party.

'Why, my dear,' she exclaims, not sorry to set off any obligation involved in the loan of the barouche by the humiliation of its owner, 'it's that dear, good little man, Dr. Faunthorpe, and your sisters. I wonder you didn't recognise the pony; there's not another like him in Redcastle.'

'Is that little girl your sister?' says Sir Wilford. 'I beg your pardon and hers if I said anything impertinent. She seems a fine, high-spirited girl, but in an awful state of excitement. Shall I bring her across to you? She wants to speak to you, I fancy.'

'Oh, pray leave her where she is,' replies Sibyl. 'She's a dreadful nuisance. There, there, child,' nodding to the obnoxious hoyden; 'won't that do?'

Jane kisses her hand again vehemently, and having succeeded in attracting her sister's attention, seems tolerably resigned.

Sibyl feels that her maize-coloured silk and India muslin, the barouche, and all things are a failure after this. And there are the Miss Cardonnels in their plain holland gowns, with satchels at their waists, brown hats, brown feathers, brown holland umbrellas—singularly plain attire, which looks in better form for a racecourse than Sibyl's flower-show costume.

Sir Wilford stands by the barouche for an hour or more, and tells Sibyl all about the horses. He devotes himself to her almost exclusively before the face of Redcastle. Fred Stormont, pounding restlessly about upon the gray, and bringing that excited animal to anchor beside the barouche, when he can, feels that he is nowhere, and begins to think that he has erred on the side of caution and hesitancy in his wooing of Stephen Trenchard's niece.

The races may not be good races from a professional point of view,—the horses may be the very refuse of famous stables, but the excitement and exhilaration of the crowd are not lessened by that fact. No weighty stakes are lost or won, but every one seems happy. Broad grins are the only wear. There is a great deal of picnicking between the races, and people who would have lived through the day at home on a biscuit and a glass of sherry, do wild things in the consumption of lobster salad, chicken, mayonnaise, and pigeon pie.

Mrs. Stormont has provided the most refined of baskets,—delicate papers of anchovy and chicken sandwiches, fragile biscuits, some choice fruit, and a bottle of dry sherry. These favours she dispenses to her party, while Sir Wilford and his people are devouring their lobster salad on the roof of the drag, enlivened by a running fire of champagne corks.

Fred, roving to and fro on the gray, declines the maternal sherry.

'No thanks, mother; when I'm dry myself I don't want my wine dry. I'll go and do a bitter at the stand presently.'

Sibyl has gradually recovered that death-blow of the pony carriage. Sir Wilford Cardonnel's attentions have put her in good humour. It is as if some prince of the blood-royal had paid her homage in the presence of his subjects, and she knows that Mrs. Groshen and Mrs. Marlin Spyke, the Miss Jewsons, and above all dearest Rose and Violet, will be provoked to envy by the distinction thus conferred upon her. Indeed, dear Rose's brow has a cloudy look already, and Violet is snappish. Only Mrs. Stormont preserves her equanimity, and smiles upon the baronet when he re-descends from the drag and takes up his position again beside the barouche.

Sibyl's ignorance of racing matters is curiously attractive to him from its novelty, his sisters being learned in the minutest details of the turf, and as well up in stable talk as their brother's stud groom, under whom they have graduated. He lingers by her side till the races are nearly over, and his grooms go to fetch the horses. The important duty of seeing these animals put to distracts him a little, but he comes back again at the last to say good-bye to Mrs. Stormont and her daughters and to Sibyl.

'I should like you to know my sisters,' he says, 'I am sure you'd suit each other,'—a mendacious assertion inspired by the exigencies of the situation, Sir Wilford knowing very well that town and county have seldom an idea in common. He has not ventured to bring about an introduction on the course, his sisters being at an inconvenient altitude, and of an uncertain temper. But he feels that he must contrive to see more of Miss Faunthorpe somehow or other. Who can she be? She is too richly dressed for a governess, and the Stormonts are too civil to her. Yet she must be a nobody, or Mrs. Stormont would have taken care to parade her people. He resolves to call on the Stormonts in a day or two, and find out all about their *protegée*; and sustained by this resolution, he takes his reluctant leave. How splendid his coach looks to Sibyl! the four broad-chested bays, with their honest English-looking heads, horses that mean work, the steel chains, the black harness, austerely simple in its mounting, the grooms in Lincoln green, the two girls in brown holland nodding good-bye to the Stormonts as Sir Wilford drives away, making a wide sweep upon the turf, his horses going as if this was the happiest moment of their lives, his grooms climbing into their places after the team has started, with some hazard of life and limb, but with honour to themselves.

'Charming man, Sir Wilford Cardonnel,' says Mrs. Stormont. 'The Cardonnels are one of the oldest of our county families. How do you like him, Sibyl?'

'He seems good-natured,' replies Sibyl, carelessly.

What are the Cardonnels to her? and what avails this young man's admiration, save to flaunt in the face of her acquaintance? *Her* name is written in the Book of Fate, and in the registers of St. Apollonius, Pimlico.

'The soul of good nature. His sisters are charming too; great friends of Rose and Violet's.'

'Uncommon intimate,' says Fred, who has dragged that unyielding gray up to the carriage once more. 'They see one another twice a year, I should think. For my part, I detest the county people. They're a parcel of narrow-minded snobs, who think the beginning and end of life is to ride straight to hounds.'

Having relieved his jealous pangs by this vindictive burst, Fred goes to look after Mr. Trenchard's horses, and presently the barouche falls in with the line of vehicles driving towards the town, Fred and the gray in attendance, that animal suddenly amenable to reason now that he is going back to his stable.

Sibyl drives home with the Stormonts, with whom she is to dine.

'I do hope your dear uncle will join us at dinner,' says Mrs. Stormont.

That hope is nipped in the bud, for among the day's letters Mrs. Stormont finds a note from Stephen Trenchard:—

'DEAR MRS. STORMONT,

'I do not feel well enough to avail myself of your kind invitation for this evening, so must ask you to excuse me. I will send the carriage for Sibyl at half-past ten.

'Yours very truly,

'STEPHEN TRENCHARD.'

'I'm afraid your uncle is breaking up, my dear,' remarks Mrs. Stormont with a sigh. 'I saw a change in him when I called the other day.'

'That is strange,' says Sibyl, 'for he has not been actually ill. He has not kept his room for a single day.'

'He is a man of iron nerves, my love, and would be reluctant to give way to illness, but I feel sure that he is declining. At his age, and after a life in

India, you cannot expect to have him with you many years.'

Sibyl looks grave. No, she has not counted on her uncle living many years, or at least when she deserted her husband she told herself that the old man's life could be but brief, and that a few years of patience would be rewarded by fortune and independence for all her life to come. But since she has lived with uncle Trenchard she has been inclined to think differently. In his wiry frame and active habits, his temperance, his iron nerves, there seems the promise of life prolonged to its utmost limits. He may live to be ninety, and she be almost an old woman ere she reap the wages of her toil; and in that case what is to become of Alexis?

Mrs. Stormont's remark inspires a new hope. The end may not be so far off after all. She is not ungrateful to her uncle, she is not without some kind of affection for him, but the hope of reunion with her husband, of forgiveness and atonement, is sweet.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

The dinner at the Stormonts is as other dinners in the same house. The guests are Mr. and Mrs. Groshen, Dr. and Mrs. Mitsand, and one Miss Mitsand, the ugliest, as Fred remarks with a sense of injury. The flower-pots on the table, the silver dishes, the ruby hock glasses, the finger-glasses engraved with the Greek key pattern, the talk, the twaddle, Mrs. Groshen's Honiton lace, how well Sibyl knows them all! She breathes a sigh for the days that are gone, before that slow, pompous banquet is ended, and thinks that after all there was more pleasure in a haddock and a cup of tea in Dixon Street than in all this provincial splendour.

The talk is chiefly of the races, who was there and who was not there. The county families are brought on the table, and discussed fully, together with their genealogies, which are as well known and as complicated as if they were Greek heroes or demigods.

Mrs. Stormont praises Sir Wilford Cardonnel, and those dear girls his sisters, and talks of the rose-garden and ferneries at the How; whereby she bears down rather heavily upon Mrs. Groshen, who has never been bidden to that earthly paradise. Mr. Groshen opines that Sir Wilford is better off than most of the county people, whom he disparages as a shabby lot, but adds that at the rate Sir Wilford is going on with his drags and hunters he is likely to outrun the constable before he is many years older.

That the evening entertainment which follows the feast is dull, not even Mrs. Stormont's dearest friend Mrs. Groshen could deny, were her views taken on the subject.

Sibyl knows every piece of furniture in the drawing-room by heart, every photograph in the album. She knows the Miss Stormonts' favourite fantasias better than those performers themselves, or they would play more correctly. She knows exactly how she will be asked to play one of her lovely pieces, or to sing one of her sweet songs, and how the young ladies will pretend to delight in Chopin, and the elders praise her wonderful 'fingering,' and how stifled yawns will at intervals prevail among the company. She knows how Violet will tell her about some new fern she has discovered, 'such a darling'; and how Rose will ask her if she is going on the Continent this year, and will then favour her with some interesting facts about her Swiss tour with papa three years ago.

What a blessed relief when the clock on the mantelpiece strikes eleven! Sibyl has been wondering for ever so long why her carriage has not been announced.

'Dear Mrs. Stormont, I think they must have forgotten me,' she says. 'But we are such near neighbours, I can walk home easily.'

'My love, it is quite early; don't talk of going; the carriage will come for you, I am sure. We want another of those delicious sonatas. Not going, surely, Mrs. Groshen,' cries Mrs. Stormont, rejoicing in her soul to see the banker and his wife advancing to her, stately and smiling, to tell her that they have spent 'a most enjoyable evening.'

Every one discovers that it is frightfully late. No one would have supposed it for an instant. How swift are the pinions of Time when pleasure quickens them!

Mrs. Stormont, pressed by Sibyl, makes an inquiry about Mr. Trenchard's carriage. It has not come.

'We walked here,' says Mr. Groshen. 'Matilda grumbled about her dress, but I wouldn't have my horses harnessed again after they had come from the racecourse, and I couldn't have them standing in harness while she changed her dress. It is no use having fine horses if you don't study them a little. And we're such near neighbours. We'll take care of you, Miss Faunthorpe, if you don't mind walking.'

'I should like it,' says Sibyl, with a longing look at the cool purple night beyond the open window of the gaslit room.

Fred springs up eagerly from the ottoman on which he has been sitting in patient attendance on the unattractive Miss Mitsand.

'Let me see you home, Miss Faunthorpe. I shall be delighted.'

Sibyl runs away to put on her bonnet, and the guests issue forth in a bevy. Dr. Mitsand's useful brougham is waiting, the others walk home in the tranquil perfumed air. Fred offers his arm, which Sibyl accepts with the infinite ease of indifference. Mr. and Mrs. Groshen make themselves agreeable by walking on briskly.

'Isn't it a lovely night?' gasps Fred, rapturously.

'Yes, it's very fine. We generally have nice evenings in June.'

'Ye-es,' replies Fred, after judicious consideration. 'I think we do. Nice long evenings, at any rate. The twenty-first being the longest day, of course, is a reason. Nice month for races, too; but rather rainy sometimes, don't you think?'

Sibyl concedes the point.

'I remember one wet June—poured all the month—regular cats and dogs. The racecourse was a morass; of course the heaviest timbered horse won. Here we are, I declare, close to Lancaster Lodge! How I wish it was further off!'

'Not very flattering to me to wish us less near neighbours,' says Sibyl, laughing.

'Oh, come now, Miss Faunthorpe, you know I don't mean that; but just for to-night, for the sake of prolonging this delightful walk.'

'Don't talk nonsense, please,' says Sibyl. 'And be kind enough to ring the bell.'

They are standing at the gate by this time, and Fred lingers, as if loth to perform that necessary duty.

He rings, and the lodgekeeper opens the side gate. Sibyl offers Mr. Stormont her hand on the threshold, but gives him no invitation to enter the domain.

'Good night,' she says, and then cries suddenly, 'Do you hear that?'

It is a most melodious jug-jugging from a dark clump of chestnuts near the gate.

'I hear something chirping,' replies Fred, dubiously.

'It's the nightingale. It sings every night just at this time. Isn't it exquisite?'

'Rather throaty,' says Fred.

'Good night,' repeats Sibyl, shutting the gate in his face.

'Horrid young man!' she ejaculates.

How dark, and cool, and silent, save for those nightingales, the grounds are to-night! She is in no hurry to go into the house. The dewy turf, the tall black trees standing out against a sky of mixed light and colour, the moon rising grandly above the elms yonder, just where the Lancaster Lodge grounds meet the edge of Redcastle Park, Sir John Boldero's domain—all is beautiful.

Sibyl walks slowly along the shrubberied drive, and round to the lawn behind the house, that wide sweep of velvet grass upon which she and her uncle spend the summer afternoons. Mr. Trenchard's study is on this side of the house. The lighted windows inform Sibyl that he has not yet retired for the night.

The study opens on the lawn by a half-glass door. She can go into the house this way, and surprise her forgetful uncle by her return, and tell him all about her day, about Sir Wilford Cardonnel's attentions, of which she is proud. She thinks it will please her uncle to know that one of the magnates of the land has admired her.

She goes towards this glass door, but makes a dead stop before one of the study windows, startled by what she sees there. It is nothing very remarkable, perhaps, at the first showing, only uncle Stephen and a stranger; but the stranger is no ordinary person, and there is that in Stephen Trenchard's face which makes the scene remarkable.

The lamp burns brightly on the official-looking table, which is spread with papers—formidable-looking papers, bristling with figures, ruled with red ink. They are laid open, as if for inspection, and among them lies an open ledger.

Sibyl has no experience which can teach her the exact nature of these papers, but she knows instinctively that they must have some relation to commerce.

Stephen Trenchard's face is black as thunder. His left hand lies on that open ledger; with the right he points to a column of figures, running his square forefinger down the column with a vicious dig of the nail here and there, as much as to say, 'Look at that, sir, and at that!' and 'What do you say to that?'

The stranger stands at Mr. Trenchard's elbow. He is a foreigner—an Oriental—Sibyl thinks, though his plain and faultless clothes are perfectly English. He has a dark olive skin, eyes black as night, an aquiline nose, a narrow oval face, and silky blue-black hair. He is something less than middle height, stout, and sleek. His lips move softly, and his plump yellow hand seems to expostulate as Stephen Trenchard scowls at the figures.

'Who can he be?' wonders Sibyl, abandoning all intention of seeing her uncle to-night. 'Some Indian friend of uncle Stephen's, I suppose. But what can all those papers mean, and why does uncle Stephen look so angry? He looked just like that when he spoke of Philip Secretan.'

She goes round to the front of the house. The hall door is open, and the footman is airing himself on the threshold, listening to the nightingales.

'Why wasn't the carriage sent for me?' asks Sibyl.

'Indeed, ma'am, I don't know. Was it ordered?'

'I suppose so. Mr. Trenchard said he would send it.'

'I'm afraid master must have forgotten, ma'am. I didn't take no message to the coachman. Perhaps it was the gentleman coming to see him that put it out of his mind.'

'I suppose so. Who is the gentleman? Do you know?'

'No, ma'am, there was no name given. The gentleman came after dinner, about nine o'clock. He came from London, I believe. The London train hadn't been long in when he came, and he's been with Mr. Trenchard ever since.'

'Is he going to stay here to-night?'

'I don't know, ma'am. There's been nothing said, but Mrs. Skinner had the Blue Room got ready in case it should be wanted, as a premonitory measure.'

Sibyl yawns languidly, and goes upstairs to her own room, puzzled, but not seriously disturbed. This stranger has come on some business errand evidently. She knows that her uncle's temper is not particularly placid, and concludes that he has been irritated by some vexation of a commercial character. Yet she cannot understand how this can be, since she has been taught to believe that Mr. Trenchard has retired from business.

Curiosity would impel her to await the stranger's departure in the drawing-room, or to discover whether he is to remain for the night; but she does not care to encounter her uncle in his present temper, and he would doubtless be offended by anything that could look like espionage.

It is nearly midnight when she goes to her room. Her windows open on the garden, and are above those of the study. She seats herself by an open window, and looks out into the cool, shadowy garden. Presently she hears a voice raised in anger, her uncle's voice, she knows; but the stranger's tones never reach her ear.

'His voice is like his looks, I dare say,' she thinks, 'soft, and silky, and cunning. I shouldn't think he was the kind of man uncle Trenchard would trust.'

She wastes more than an hour in undressing, brushing her hair, putting away her finery. The clocks strike one, but those lighted windows still shine upon the dark turf below.

'What a long interview!' she thinks. 'This Indian gentleman must surely be going to stay all night. He would never leave the house at such an hour as this.'

She falls asleep at last, worn out by the fatigues of the day, but at the last moment hears that angry voice of her uncle's suddenly raised in a gust of passion.

She wakes next morning with an uneasy sense of something having gone wrong; but it is some moments before that scene in the room beneath flashes back upon her.

'Who can that man be?' she asks herself again, 'and why was uncle Trenchard so angry? Some Indian merchant, perhaps, to whom he has lent money. The loss of a few thousands ought not to make him so angry. It must be like a drop in the ocean compared with his immense wealth. But then I know he is fond of money, and that it pains him to part even with a ten-pound note.'

She dresses, and goes down to the dining-room, looking as fresh as the newly opened roses, to which the nightingale sings at sundown. Mr. Trenchard is in his accustomed seat, the big crimson morocco arm-chair drawn into the bay-window. The sashes are up, and the sweet morning air comes in across the flower-beds. Eight o'clock is the hour for breakfast, winter and summer, at Lancaster Lodge, and unpunctuality is little less than a crime in the eyes of Stephen Trenchard, who is usually dressed in his blue frock coat and nankeen waistcoat and trousers by six, and prowling about the grounds to the discomfiture of his gardeners.

He is a shade paler than usual, and has purple shadows under his eyes. His hand shakes a little, Sibyl thinks, as he turns the leaves of the Manchester daily, which he reads every morning before breakfast. The face he turns to her as she bends over him to administer her morning kiss has an old and wan look in the sunshine. Can it be that Mrs. Stormont is right, and that Stephen Trenchard is breaking up?'

There are no early prayers at Lancaster Lodge. Mr. Trenchard has his ideas upon religion, and his own particular creed by which he is to stand or fall, no doubt; but whatever these are, he keeps them strictly to himself. He never goes to church, a neglect of duty which in a person of Mr. Trenchard's consequence Redcastle regards as an eccentricity, but which would make a social outlaw of a small butcher or baker. He has no objection to Sibyl's attendance at the minster, where she exhibits the latest fashions on Sunday mornings. He is no declared infidel. He simply ignores religion, as a thing he has been able to dispense with all his life.

Sibyl takes her place before the silver urn, and begins the business of tea-making. Mr. Trenchard drinks green tea unmixed with black, and is very particular about the preparation of the beverage. Marion has never succeeded in pleasing him in this matter. Sibyl has never failed.

'You are looking so tired this morning, dear uncle!' she says, in her soft winning voice. 'You were up very late last night, were you not?'

'How do you know that? You were in bed, I suppose?'

'Not till twelve o'clock. I stayed rather late at the Stormonts, thinking you would send the carriage for me.'

'The carriage? ah, to be sure. I forgot.'

'It didn't matter in the least. I walked home. That horrid Fred brought me. Such a lovely night, the walk would have been delightful with any one else.'

'Ah, you don't like young Stormont?' says Mr. Trenchard, looking sharply at her. 'I'm glad of it, child. He's a genteel pauper at best. You must marry some one better than that.'

Sibyl pales at the mention of marriage.

'I don't mean to marry at all, uncle. I'm much happier as I am, with you.'

'Stuff and nonsense, my dear! Marriage is a woman's mission, and with your pretty face you are sure to get a rich husband.'

'You wouldn't have me marry for money, uncle Trenchard!' cries Sibyl, with a horrified look.

Here is this old man, rolling in wealth, and yet counselling a mercenary marriage.

'I wouldn't have you marry without money. You are no girl to play at love in a cottage. That's a game you'd soon grow tired of.'

Sibyl starts as if she had been stung.

'Don't talk of marriage, uncle Trenchard. The subject is hateful to me. There is no one in Redcastle that I care for, or am ever likely to care for.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' replies Mr. Trenchard, with a moody look, as he resumes his newspaper.

Stephen Trenchard is not a man who riots in the good things of this life. His breakfast consists of a cup of green tea and a little bit of dry toast. His other meals are of the simplest. But there is considerable epicureanism in his simplicity, and he resents a bad dinner as a personal injury.

'I expected to find a visitor here this morning,' Sibyl says presently, too curious to be silent on the subject of that nocturnal interview in Mr. Trenchard's study.

'Indeed! Have you invited any one?'

'I should not take such a liberty without your permission—unless it were Marion or Jenny. I thought the gentleman who was with you last night would stay——.'

Her uncle looks at her with a darker frown than she has ever provoked before.

'The gentleman came on business, and left as soon as his business was concluded,' replies Mr. Trenchard, in chilling tones. 'The less you trouble yourself about my affairs, Sibyl, the better for our mutual happiness.'

'I only wondered——' falters Sibyl.

'Don't wonder. It's a most unprofitable occupation of the mind. Who told you there was any one with me last night?'

'I saw him.'

'Saw him? How?'

'The night was so lovely, that I walked round the garden after Fred Stormont left me at the gate, and I was coming in at your study door, seeing your lamp burning, when I saw that you were not alone.'

'The gentleman you saw is a Calcutta merchant, an old acquaintance, who wanted my advice in a critical turn of his affairs. And now you know all that there is to be known, and may leave off wondering.'

Mr. Trenchard sips his tea and nibbles his dry toast in silence, and presently disappears altogether behind the county pa er.

Sibyl is disappointed. She expected to be questioned about yesterday, to be asked if she had made any conquests, to be able to describe Sir Wilford Cardonnel's obvious subjugation, and the effect which it produced on the Stormonts,—Rose's envious looks, Violet's constrained civility, Fred's anguish of mind as he curveted on the unmanageable gray.

Finding her uncle indisposed for conversation, Sibyl leaves the dining-room as soon as decency permits, and flits away to her favourite retreat—the garden. Life which is all a summer holiday is pleasant enough, doubtless; but oh, how monotonous! and, in Sibyl's case, how lonely!

This morning, exhausted with yesterday's excitement, she throws herself back in her low wicker chair wearily, and sighs two or three times in a quarter of an hour without knowing why,—sighs for the days that are gone—for poverty and Alexis, perhaps, though she would hardly confess as much.

The roses glorify the garden, the trees cast their deep cool shadows on the sunny grass; the house yonder, with all its windows shining in the sun, its venetians, its flower-boxes, its prosperous air, as of a habitation for which wealth has done its uttermost,—all these things remind her that her lot has fallen in a pleasant place. Yet she yearns for something more.

How soon will it come? How soon will the heritage for which she waits be hers? Mrs. Stormont has noticed a change in Stephen Trenchard, and that change has been very obvious to Sibyl's eyes this morning.

She struggles against sordid, mercenary thoughts, but they are too strong for her. She cannot help speculating about the future which seems drawing nearer, that future which is to reunite her to Alexis—to open the door of a new glad world, to release her from this dull bondage in the narrow paths of provincial pretence and respectability.

She knows that she is her uncle's favourite niece. Marion is suffered to come and go, but is rarely favoured with so much as a civil word or a kindly glance from Mr. Trenchard. Jenny he openly abominates. Her noisy bouncing ways distress him beyond measure, and she is rarely admitted to his presence. Sibyl therefore concludes that—although Mr. Trenchard, out of kindly feeling, may leave a few thousands to Marion and Jenny, just enough to secure them a competence—the bulk of his fortune will be hers. That vast wealth which has made Redcastle bow down before him will be hers; and Redcastle, which already fawns upon her—honouring her prospective riches—will fall prostrate and worship her.

'Poor uncle Trenchard,' she thinks, compassionately. 'What is the good of money to the old? His prosperity comes at the wrong end of life. What can his wealth give him? A fine house, where he lives alone, a splendid solitude. Horses which he rarely uses. For all the personal gratification he has out of his wealth he would be as well off with six hundred a year. But he has the homage of Redcastle, which would not be given to a man of limited income, even though he devoted half his revenue to acts of charity.'

Sibyl sees the end of her bondage coming near, and thinks of Alexis with tender longing for reunion. Will he come back to her? Will he forgive her? Yes, a thousand times yes. He loves her too well to be obdurate. Whatever anger he may have felt at her abandonment of him will melt away before her smiles.

It is a trial to be so ignorant of his fate, not to know where he is or what he is doing, whether fortune has been kind or cruel to him.

Great heaven! if he should be dead! If the fight should have been too hard, and he fallen!

Her heart grows cold at the mere thought that such a thing is possible. She shudders, clasps her hands over her eyes as if to shut out the horrid spectacle. If he were dead; hope's airy palace built on a fatal quicksand; and the future she has looked forward to a future never to be realized! No, she will not think of anything so hideous. Fate must be kind to true love, and she has loved her husband truly, even when deserting him to secure fortune. She remembers how often she has heard him say that it is easy for a single man to fight the battle of life, that alone he could have struggled on somehow, could have obtained employment, could have roamed the world till he found just the one spot where he could prosper. He has never said it reproachfully. He was too fond of her for that. But he has said it; and the memory of that speech is a consoling thought to Sibyl just now.

'He has emigrated, I dare say,' she thinks. 'He had a longing to try his luck in Australia. He is on the other side of the world, most likely, and when I am free to call him back to me, I shall have to wait ever so long before he can come.'

She is aroused from this reverie, from the deepest deep of thought, by the mellifluous soprano of Mrs. Stormont, raised inquiringly—that society voice in which a comedy actress makes some trivial inquiry at the wing before she appears on the stage.

'In the garden?' screams Mrs. Stormont. 'Dear child! I will find her.'

Mrs. Stormont emerges from the shrubbery, rustling in a flounced cambric morning dress. She wears a black lace shawl, her last summer's bonnet 'done up' inexpensively by her maid, and in honest truth has been 'up town' to pay her tradesmen's weekly accounts. The Stormonts, though near, are good pay.

'Old Mother Stormont will haggle about the bone in a bit of brisket, and she will worry about her Sunday sirloin,' says Mr. Heffer, the butcher, 'but she do pay uncommon reglar, I will say that for the old gal.'

Familiarity, induced by Mrs. Stormont's frequent personal visits of complaint or inspection at Mr. Heffer's shop, has bred contempt in that citizen's mind. The customers he respects are those who never cross his threshold or weigh his meat.

Mrs. Stormont is followed by a tall stranger in gray, who looks about him admiringly, and whom Sibyl hardly recognises at the first glance.

'Charming place—kept so well, too—garden much neater than my fellows keep the How. How-d'ye-do, Miss Faunthorpe? Hope you weren't tired by the races yesterday.'

Sibyl blushes becomingly, startled by this sudden appearance of the mighty Sir Wilford Cardonnel—startled out of all sad thoughts, and gratified by this proof of her power.

'I met this tiresome Sir Wilford in the market-place, Sibyl,' says Mrs. Stormont with juvenile playfulness—which sits upon her portly middle age about as becomingly as the airy gauze bonnet on her pepper-and-salt chignon,—'and he insisted upon my bringing him to call on you. I hope you are not shocked with us for invading you at such a barbarous hour.'

Sibyl assures Mrs. Stormont that the hour is a matter of no importance.

'You are just as glad to see us as if we had come in proper visiting hours,' exclaims the lady. 'What a dear candid child she is! I don't know what you did with my poor Fred last night, Sibyl, but you sent him home quite low-spirited.'

This is said with meaning, and Sir Wilford looks at the speaker curiously.

'Poor Fred,' he cries in his loud voice, "I think it must have been the bumping he got on that bony gray that made him low-spirited.'

'I'm afraid I said good night rather abruptly,' says Sibyl, 'which was very ungrateful of me after his kindness in seeing me home. But I was vexed with him for not appreciating our nightingales.'

'Not appreciate the nightingales! How odd!'

exclaims Mrs. Stormont. 'Fred has such an ear for music.'

'Shouldn't have thought it from his trotting,' remarks the candid Sir Wilford. 'Man with a good ear always keeps time in the saddle. So you've nightingales here, Miss Faunthorpe? Shouldn't have thought it, so near the town. We've no end of 'em at the How. Jug-jug-jug from sundown till midnight. I should like to show you our gardens at the How, by the by. Mrs. Stormont might drive you over some day.'

Mrs. Stormont, divided between her desire to be intimate with the best of the county families, and her maternal solicitude for Fred, whose interests are evidently in peril, can only smile blandly and assentingly. To drive over to the How in a friendly way is to take the highest rank in Redcastle society. Mrs. Groshen will feel absolutely crushed when she is told of such a visit. And after all, poor Fred's courtship hangs on hand dismally, and may never come to anything. Sibyl, although courted by the whole family, has given no token of preference for the eldest hope. Sibyl with Stephen Trenchard's fortune, and exalted into Lady Cardonnel, would be a splendid person to know. The dear girls, Rose and Violet, would be asked to stay at the How, no doubt: might make splendid matches, marry into the county.

The conversation meanders on in the same elevated strain for half an hour while Sibyl and her visitors walk round the garden, Sir Wilford admiring everything 'monstrously,' to use his own phrase, and grumbling a good deal about those 'fellows' of his at the How.

'I never saw such flower-beds,' he says; 'there's not a dead leaf among 'em.'

'My uncle is very particular about the garden,' says Sibyl.

'That reminds me that I must ask to be introduced to your uncle.'

'I dare say he is in his study,' replies Sibyl. 'I'll run and see.'

She has an idea that it would hardly do to take Sir Wilford to her uncle without some note of preparation, Mr. Trenchard being somewhat out of sorts to-day.

She is saved the trouble of going to the study, however, for Stephen Trenchard is seen coming across the lawn in his Panama hat, and they all three go to meet him. He receives Mrs. Stormont and Sir Wilford graciously, and, the luncheon bell ringing while he is conversing with them, insists upon their staying to luncheon. So they all go together to the dining-room, Mrs. Stormont protesting that her absence will be the cause of consternation at home.

Sibyl is fluttered and a little pleased at the idea of having made such an important conquest,—a useless triumph, of course, for a woman in her position, but one that flatters womanly vanity.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

The great city lies seething like some unholy caldron under the blazing August sun, when a lonely wayfarer returns to it after two years' exile on the other side of the world. Rank and fashion, middle-class wealth, professional respectability, have deserted the airy western squares and streets for English watering-places, Welsh mountains, Scottish moors, Irish lakes, or broiling Continental esplanades, spas, conversation-houses, Rhine steamers, and so on; but from this eastern end of the city there is no such exodus; here life holds on patiently through the dog days, here labour knows no respite, and the grinding of the universal mill slackens not.

Alexis Secretan, just disembarked from the famous clipper ship *Oronoko*, surveys the dingy street, the driving crowd, with wonder, not unmingled with loathing. What a weary city it seems to this man, who walked its stony ways two years ago a seeker for bread, and for the most part found only the natural product of the soil—a stone! He has found fortune kinder at the antipodes, man more friendly, Nature more liberal of her smiles, less shut out and constrained by brick and mortar. He has achieved no sudden prosperity, he has worked hard and honestly, and has done well; so well as to be able to come back to this sophisticated, unfriendly city, whither fate draws him as a magnet.

It is not possible for a man to feel more lonely than this returning wayfarer. In all the vast city which spreads itself about and around him there lives only one person from whom he can hope for a friendly smile of welcome. His humble friend Dick Plowden is the only being to whom he can go with any certainty of not being considered a bore and an intruder. His old brother officers —the companions of his brief day of prosperity,—alas! he wore out the friendship of those when he sank to that lowest grade in the animal creation —the borrowing animal.

Dear old Dick! honest, friendly Dick, to whom he has long since repaid that ten-pound note borrowed for the false wife who deserted him—it is to Dick he goes naturally to-day, as brother goes to brother. It is to Dick's recommendation to Messrs. Keel and Skrew he owes the honourable independence of the last two years. But for Dick's influence he would never have got that fair start in a new world which has enabled him to keep his head above water, and do Messrs. Keel and Skrew honourable service on the other side of the globe.

He can afford to take a hansom, and drive down to the Brompton Road as fast as a broken-down thorough-bred can take him. Dear old Dick is in the little back parlour hard at work, as on that snowy day when desperation guided Alexis to that last resource of the desperate—the humble friend of better days. But Dick is not occupied to-day in the mechanical drudgery of map-painting; he is writing a book, a little book on astronomy, for the use of schools,—that elementary geography of his having been a success.

He starts up at sight of Alexis, who has pushed by the maid-of-all-work and entered unannounced. The two men greet each other heartily.

'Captain Secretan! What a delightful surprise! and looking so well too, so handsome, just like my original captain, who took mother's first floor.'

'Dear old Dick!'

'But I did not expect you home for ever so long. I thought you were going to stop at Sidney, working for the firm until you had made your fortune.'

'Fortune is all very well, Dick—and the firm is all very well. They have been liberal employers, and I have worked honestly for them, and been lucky in my dealings for them. But the soul of man needs something more than fifteen per cent. commission upon all his dealings. There was an emptiness in my heart, Dick, out yonder—a cavity that needed filling somehow,—so I took the first opportunity to slip across to the old world, though God knows there's little chance of filling the vacuum here. However, I shall only stop a month or so, and then go back again. The firm has been very kind about the matter. I told them my health was failing, and that the voyage home was my only hope of getting strong again, so they gave me a free passage both ways, and I'm to hold counsel with them about the opening of a new branch of the business out yonder.'

'And were you really ill?' asks Richard Plowden, sympathetically.

'What I told the firm was not much more than the truth, old fellow. When heart-sickness sets in, bodily sickness is pretty sure to follow. My nights were growing sleepless, full of bad thoughts. Well, Dick, you can guess my first question. Any news—of her?'

Richard Plowden shakes his head despondingly.

'I am the last to hear of her,' he says,—'I who live as much out of the world as if I were a hermit in a cave.'

'She might have come to you to inquire about my fate, knowing you were the only friend adversity had left me.'

'She has never come.'

'Nor written?'

'Not a line. Forgive me if I wound you, Captain Secretan——.'

'Call me Alex, Dick, or we shall quarrel.'

'Forgive me if I seem to speak hardly of her, but upon my honour, Alex, it seems to me that you have nothing to do but to forget her. She deserted you when you had the most need of her love, when, if she had been a true woman, she would have clung to you most fondly.'

'Granted, Dick. She was selfish, base, cowardly. We had sunk together into the slough of despond, and she contrived to scramble out of it and leave me in the mire. She was clever enough to make use of me to accomplish her escape, sent me out among hard-hearted humanity to borrow, beg, or steal the means by which she meant to separate herself from my fallen fortunes. Do you think I came across the world to seek for her? No, Dick, I am not such a fool. I have been cheated once. I shall never be her dupe again. Do you think I could ever trust her any more?—that if fortune smiled upon us, and she pretended to love me, I could feel any confidence in her truth, any security in her affection? The void in my heart is to be filled, but not by her. I came back to the old world to look for my child,—the child that was to be born to me when my cruel wife left me.'

'You do not even know that the child survived its birth?'

'What a Job's comforter you are, Dick! I know nothing except that I am going to hunt for the mother in order that I may find the child.'

'The law would give the custody of so young a child to the mother.'

'I snap my fingers at the law. Truth is great and shall prevail. So base a wife must be an unworthy mother. I will find her price for the child. She will sell that as she sold me—for a mess of pottage. When I left England I was desperate—mad, perhaps, or I should not have left the land that held my child. My loneliness in that strange world yonder awakened a father's feelings, I found out how dreary a prospect life is to a man who stands alone—a blank and barren desert.

with no green oasis—no distant city to which he may direct his steps—a lonely pilgrimage leading nowhere.'

'How shall you commence your search?'

'I have thought of that question many a time on board the *Oronoko.* There is little choice of plan left open to me. You remember that before Messrs. Keel and Skrew took me into their employment, I went to Redcastle, the place my wife came from when she came to London as Mrs. Hazleton's governess. I saw Sibyl's younger sister, made my inquiries, and found that Sibyl had not been heard of at Redcastle. She had not gone straight home to her uncle, the parish doctor, as I had supposed it probable she would, and flung herself and her troubles upon his shoulders. No, she was too artful for that. She had some deeper game in view—some rich relative from whom she had expectations, as I gathered dimly from her letter. I could find out nothing more from the girl than that Sibyl was supposed still to be in Mrs. Hazleton's employment—that her marriage was not known to her family, that she had not reappeared at Redcastle, or received any help from her uncle the doctor. Where could she be, and how could she be living? She must have found the wealthy friend whose existence I inferred from her letter, and this wealthy friend or relative was evidently not an inhabitant of Redcastle. She must have found a safe haven somewhere. I made no further attempt to trace her. I was too deeply stung by her abandonment. "Let her go," I said to myself, as I crawled wearily away from that dismal country town, through the January weather, "she and I have done with each other." I did not foresee that the hour would come in which the thought of my child would be more precious to me than my false wife's love had ever been. But in my lonely days in a strange land—lonely in spite of what the world calls friendship—I have suffered my hopes to build themselves round that one image—the child whose face I have never seen. Now, Dick, there seem to be only two sources of information open to me. I can go down to Redcastle again, and renew my inquiries at Dr. Faunthorpe's; or, before doing that, I can hunt up an honest creature who used to be housemaid at Mrs. Hazleton's, and who made herself useful to my wife in sending her letters, and so helping her to sustain the falsehood which she chose to practise upon her uncle, for quite inadequate reasons, as they always seemed to me. But there are minds to which double-dealing is an absolute pleasure, and hers may be of that order,' adds Alexis, bitterly.

'You have not dined,' says Richard Plowden, by way of changing the conversation. 'I'll order a steak and potatoes. You'll enjoy an English rumpsteak after ship fare, and you know mother's a first-rate cook. You'll take up your quarters with us, of course, while you are in London?'

'I shall go to Redcastle to-morrow, Dick, if I can find Jane Dimond, the housemaid, this evening. But if you can give me a bed for to-night, I will accept it with all gratitude. Don't trouble about dinner. I had a substantial lunch on board the *Oronoko.* I'll go to Lowther Street at once, and we can smoke our pipes together when I come back, and talk over old times, when I was a careless, thriftless bachelor. How selfish I am, talking of my own affairs all this time, and never so much as congratulating you on your success as an author!'

'Don't call me an author,' protests Dick, blushing. 'That's putting me too much upon a level with Scott and Bulwer, and geniuses of that kind. I was lucky enough to hit upon an easy, simple way of stating hard facts—making information a little more attractive than it has been made for young minds, and the style took with the schools and teachers. My little handbook of geography has gone through fifteen editions, and has been quite a fortune to me, and I'm now doing the sixth in a series of handbooks, all more or less geographical, up to the present one, in which I venture upon astronomy. So you see map-painting led to something, after all.'

'Intelligence and industry always lead to something, Dick. There would be a screw loose in the scheme of the universe if they could ever lead to nothing.'

'Those little books have done wonders for us,' exclaims Dick, with harmless pride. 'Mother doesn't work half so hard as she used, though she will stick to the cooking; and she has a silk gown to wear on Sundays,—doesn't it rustle, too! you can hear it at the very top of the staircase, —none of your soft silks for mother, but a silk that stands alone and lets you know that it's there. And I've got a garden. See!'

The Duke of Devonshire could feel no loftier pride in the possession of Chatsworth than swells Richard Plowden's breast to-day, as he draws up the venetian blind and allows his cherished garden to burst upon Alexis Secretan's admiring gaze.

It is a quadrangle of fifteen feet square, shut in by whitewashed walls, overshadowed by leaden cisterns, bounded by the slated roofs of a mews, but Dick has built rockeries in the corners, rockeries where ferns flourish greenly. He has trained ivy over one wall—that blessed parasite which is so fair and quick-growing a screen for brick and mortar abominations—Virginia creeper over another. The grass is soft and green, and in the middle of the little plot there is a stone basin—a timeworn old basin which Dick has picked up for half a sovereign in a builder's yard, but a basin in which a slender jet of water actually plays. Scarlet geraniums in green tubs give colour to the picture; an old stone bench, also a bargain of Dick's, offers repose to the idler in this narrow pleasaunce. Shut in as it is by mews and back kitchens,—overshadowed as it is by cisterns,—Richard Plowden's garden is absolutely pretty. Alexis accords it his unmeasured approbation.

'It's the first English garden I've seen for the last two years, Dick, and it smiles at me like a welcome home. Yes, I'll come back in time to smoke a cigar on that stone bench of yours under the summer stars.'

'We drink tea out there on fine Sunday afternoons in the warm weather,' says Dick, smiling at the ferns and rockwork, 'and you can't imagine how proud mother is. I've got the real *Osmunda regalis*, or flowering fern, in that corner, though you'd hardly believe it; and there's a *Polypodium* over there that a friendly lodger of ours brought me from Ilfracombe.'

'Well, Dick, I must go and look for Jane Dimond, but I'll be back in a couple of hours at latest.'

Dick limps to the door with his friend, and follows his figure with admiring eyes till it vanishes in the current of wayfarers.

'What a fine fellow he is! and to think that a wife could desert him! I'll ask mother to get a bit of something nice for supper, a veal cutlet and a few peas, or a chicken and a slice of broiled ham.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

AT ARM'S LENGTH.

There are some people whose houses never change; people whose habitations are in a manner symbolical of their lives, and whose even tenor of existence nothing less than the undertaker can overthrow. Mrs. Hazleton is one of these eminently respectable personages. She has occupied the house in Lowther Street for the last ten years. She has gone to the sea-side every year of those ten, and at exactly the same period, has returned after the same interval, has given her great parties at the same seasons, and has lived a methodical and prosperous existence, with satisfaction to herself and her neighbours, and with considerable profit to the surrounding shopkeepers. When the London season is over, Mrs. Hazleton goes to the sea-side, not because she belongs to that flight of fashionable swallows who follow pleasure's summer from clime to clime, but simply because London in August is unendurable,—baking pavements, scorched verdure, dust and grime on everything, and a sense of desertion in all those regions which the upper ten thousand and a considerable portion of the lower million inhabit.

There could not be a better time for Alexis to make his inquiry without having to present himself in a formal manner to his old acquaintance. Mrs. Hazleton is at Scarborough, with children, governess, and *femme de chambre.* The blinds are all down, save one of the venetians in the dining-room, which is drawn up about halfway, and in the space thus exposed to view the comfortable round face of Mrs. Hazleton's cook, and the lanky countenance of Mrs. Hazleton's sandy-haired footman—a footman whose visage is happily unfamiliar to Alexis—exhibit themselves. Cook and footman are engaged in looking out of the window. There is not much for them to see in Lowther Street on this August evening, but it is a relief to be above ground for a little while, after the twilight of those underground dungeons to which the London domestic is confined.

Alexis mounts the steps, and knocks and rings, under the calm survey of those two pair of eyes. The sandy-haired footman is not impressed by Mr. Secretan's appearance. Alexis is carelessly dressed in garments of a colonial cut, a velveteen shooting jacket, a soft felt hat, clothes chosen for ease and hard wear rather than for fashion. The footman yawns audibly, and when reminded of his duties by a nudge from cook's plump elbow, mutters contemptuously, 'Oh, hang it! that fellow can wait, you know;' and then withdraws himself lazily from his post of observation, and anon opens the street door a little way, filling the opening with his person.

'Is there a young woman called Dimond in service here now?' asks Alexis.

'Dun know, I'm shaw,' replies the flunkey, with another yawn. 'What do you want with her?'

'We won't go into particulars till you find out whether she's still here,' answers Alexis, coolly. 'Perhaps you will condescend so far as to inquire of your fellow-servant?'

'Hi, cooky,' bawls the footman, 'what's our Jane's name? Dimond, ain't it?'

'Of course it is. You might have known,' answers cook, who has come into the hall, and now contemplates Alexis over the youth's shoulder.

'What do you want with Jane Dimond?' she inquires, sharply. 'There's no followers allowed here.'

'I'm not a follower,' answers Alexis, 'but I want to see Jane Dimond alone for five minutes, on business.'

The countenances of cook and footman plainly express an apprehension that this is the beginning of a deep-laid scheme against the family plate.

'I'll tell you what, young man,' says the cook, with asperity, 'my missus is out of town, and we don't want no airy sneaks loafing about while she's away.'

'And it ain't no good for them to loaf,' adds the sandy-haired young man, who has not shaved for the last day or two, and whose chin is adorned with a tawny stubble like a newly-cut wheat field. 'The plate has all been sent to the bank.'

Alexis fairly bursts out laughing.

'Is there so much difference between a chimney-pot hat and a wide awake? between Poole and a colonial tailor?' he says to himself, and then he adds aloud. 'If one of you simpletons will take the trouble to call Jane Dimond, she will be able to tell you that I'm a gentleman, and that I have not come after the tea-spoons or the umbrellas. I'll wait in the street for her. You can tell her that a gentleman from Australia wants a few words with her.'

Cook and footman whisper doubtfully for half a minute, and then shut the door upon Mr. Secretan, leaving him to infer their acquiescence with his request.

He paces the pavement for five minutes or so, and then the good-natured Jane Dimond comes down the steps, while cook and footman stand in the doorway to watch the proceedings.

They see Jane gesticulate as in extreme surprise at sight of Alexis, and then the two walk a little further off, quite out of earshot, to the aggravation of Jane's fellow-servants, whose curiosity is by this time raised to the highest pitch.

'I shouldn't wonder if he was some haristocratic arf-brother of ers,' says cook, who is a devoted student of "Reynolds's Mysteries of London." 'Life is full of family secrets and such like.'

'Lor, sir,' says Jane Dimond, when she has recovered the shock of surprise; 'I thought you was dead and gone.'

'Did you, Jane. Why?'

'Because I fancied if you was in the land of the livin' you wouldn't have turned a deaf ear to that advertisement.'

'What advertisement?'

'The advertisement as Miss Faunthorpe—I beg pardon, Mrs.——'

'Never mind the name, girl. Tell me all about the advertisement.'

Jane explains herself in a roundabout way, but in due course Alexis knows all that Jane knows, except his wife's present abode. That the girl refuses to tell even to him.

'She told me to keep it a secret, and I'm not going to tell no one without her permission,' says Jane resolutely.

This resolve the husband combats, but in vain.

'I'll arst her leaf to tell you, and when I've got her leaf I'll tell you,' answers Jane. 'Wild horses wouldn't move me from that.'

'Telegraph to her then directly,' cries Alexis, taking out a handful of silver. 'Come with me to the nearest telegraph office, and I'll write the message for you. You can put in the address yourself.'

'No, I won't send her no telegrafts, lest I should get her into trouble with her friends. I'll write to her.'

'Inexorable girl! Is she in the country?'

'Yes.'

'And the country post is gone ever so long. I shall have to wait twenty-four hours before you can get her answer.'

'I can't help that,' says Jane, with an inflexible air. 'She's trusted me, and I'll do my dooty by her. As you've stayed away so long it can't hurt you to stay a little longer.'

'Stayed away so long, cruel girl! Don't you know that it was she who left me?'

'Whatever she did, I make no doubt she did it for the best,' answers Jane, true to the fair young governess whose donations of lace and ribbon, soiled gloves, darned stockings, and friendly smiles, had won her heart years ago.

'See here, Jane,' says Alexis, unfolding a five-pound note. 'Here's something to buy you a silk gown for Sundays. Now don't you think that you could contrive to tell me the address at once? You know my wife wishes to see me. The advertisement says that.'

'No, it don't,' answers Jane, taking a tiny slip of paper out of her shabby old portemonnaie. 'The advertisement says nothing of the kind.'

She reads as follows:—

'S. S. to Alexis. You are not forgotten. In all I do I am faithful to your interests. I look forward to our reunion. Wait and hope, as I do. Write and tell me where you are, and what you are doing. —Address, S. S., Post Office, Hale Street, Pimlico.'

'There, you see,' exclaims Jane, triumphant. 'There's not a word about wanting to see you. She only wants to hear from you.'

'Heartless woman!' mutters Alexis. 'Yet I'm glad she was just a little anxious to know my fate. I'll go to a coffee-house, and write to her, and bring the letter to you to post. There's the silk gown for you all the same, Jane, to show that I bear no malice.

'Oh, sir!' cries the housemaid, overcome by this generosity, 'I couldn' think——'

'You needn't think about it. You've only to take the money and buy your gown. I'll go and write my letter.'

He goes to the nearest coffee-house and writes to Sibyl. There is a touch of bitterness in the composition, though his wounded heart is full of love for her all the time. Neither exile nor the sense of her unkindness have been strong enough to exclude her from his heart. He may pretend to himself and to his friend Dick Plowden that he has ceased to love his wife, that he seeks his child alone; but the mere fact that she has sought to obtain tidings of him is enough to melt his heart, to change pride and anger to love and pardon.

'Whatever the exalted sphere in which you now move,' he writes, 'you may be glad to know that your desertion has not quite been the death of me. I have contrived to live, somehow, though indignation against your cruelty has lacerated my heart, and love for the wife who deserted me has proved an incurable disease. I have not starved or been driven to hang myself, and I have come back from the other side of the world because I have a foolish hankering to know the fate of the woman who swore at the altar to love, honour, and obey me, and kept her vow by abandoning me in my darkest hour of need. Where are you, Sibyl? and with whom? What has been your reward for deserting me? Has your scheme of life been a wise one? Have your hopes prospered?

'Write and answer all these questions freely and fully if you recognise the tie which, in the sight of God and man, makes us two one. Tell me about our child, the infant I have never seen, yet whose baby face has haunted my dreams. You have given your babe to the care of strangers perhaps, but I conclude you have watched over its welfare.

'Tell me further if there are in your life—prosperous as it may be—some few weaker moments when your heart yearns for reunion with the husband you once loved. But no, love, I will show you an easier way. Do not stop to answer one of these questions.

'Write, Sibyl, from your heart to mine. Tell me in three words to come to you, and I will come. I will come, dear, and all the past, all that you have made me suffer, shall be forgotten and forgiven in the rapture of our reunion.—Yours for ever, if you will have it so,—ALEXIS.'

He is swayed to and fro by diverse passions as he writes this letter, now all bitterness, now fond unreasoning love. He has not the courage to read over his effusion, but seals and addresses it hastily, and hurries back to Lowther Street. There is no difficulty about admittance this time. Jane Dimond opens the door, receives the letter, and promises to post it that evening.

It is too late for any of the provincial mails, but it is something to be assured that there shall be no needless delay.

'I shall call for the answer the day after to-morrow, in the evening. You ought to have it by that time,' says Alexis, and it seems to him that the interval will be an unendurable space of time.

He thinks about that advertisement as he goes back to the Brompton Road. Sibyl must have cared for him a little, despite her heartless abandonment of him, or she would not have felt this anxiety to be informed of his fate. She would not have committed herself by an act likely to entangle her fate with his. Once having released herself from him she would have held herself altogether aloof—she would have stretched no friendly hand across the gulf if she had not loved him. Her heart was still his, he tells himself, when she made that appeal to him. Whatever her scheme of life—whatever game she was playing—her heart was true to him.

Comforted by this assurance he is inclined to be wondrously indulgent, to forgive much, should she but prove herself worthy to be forgiven.

He tries to occupy himself with hard-headed business during that weary interval in which he waits for Sibyl's reply. He goes down to Messrs. Keel and Skrew's office, and enters upon the discussion of certain extensions and improvements in the Australian branch of the business, improvements which his experience of the colony has suggested to him. He is well received, and his views approved by Mr. Keel, the senior partner—a gentleman with large ideas, a palatial villa on Clapham Common, vineries, pineries, succession houses, and a stable which is a perennial source of profit to the horse dealers and the veterinary surgeon, and a well-spring of heart-burning and annoyance to its proprietor. Mr. Keel is a gentleman who talks of thousands as meaner people talk of sixpences, and is rumoured to have started in life thirty years ago as a stevedore, and to have founded his fortunes upon the ill-gotten gains supposed to be inseparable from that function.

Mr. Keel is pleased with Mr. Secretan's suggestions.

'You're about the only fellow I ever sent out who seems to understand the Australian trade,' he says approvingly, 'and I shall push you, young man, mark my words, I shall push you.'

Cheered by this assurance, Alexis thinks what a nice thing it will be for him to go back to Sidney with his wife and child for his companions, if Sibyl will but show herself true metal after all, and if his child lives. Two formidable 'ifs.'

He builds a delightful castle in the air, and looks so well, fed upon this nutriment of hope, that Samuel Plowden scrutinizes him with a serio-comic expression when he returns to the outer office after his interview with Mr. Keel.

'Why, I thought you came home on sick leave, youngster,' says the kindly clerk. 'By Jupiter, I never saw any one looking better.'

'All the effect of the voyage, Mr. Plowden, I assure you. I was a shadow when I went on board at Sidney.'

The second day after Mr. Secretan's interview with Jane Dimond has come, and in the evening Alexis knocks at the familiar door in Lowther Street, with a heart that seems to beat louder than the knocker.

Jane Dimond appears promptly, and divining his impatience, gives him the expected letter without a word. He wrings her hand in speechless gratitude, as if the letter were a boon from her; bids her a brief good night, and goes away with his prize. He would rather read the letter in the street, unwatched, than open it in Mrs. Hazleton's hall, under the housemaid's friendly eyes.

Yes, it is from Sibyl, in the hand he knows so well. The last letter he received from her was that cruel renunciation, that most heartless farewell—the loosening, nay, the severing of every link between them. She writes to him again. There is communion between them once more. The thought thrills him.

She begins well at all events :—

'DEAREST—DEAREST—DEAREST!'

There is love's foolish rapture in a gush of pen and ink.

'Thank God for your dear letter, though it is not altogether kind. Still it promises forgiveness for my wrong-doing, and that is much. Thank God for the knowledge that you are living and well. My heart grew very heavy when that advertisement of mine remained unanswered.

'You ask me if my scheme of life has realized what I counted upon, if my hopes have prospered. I can say yes to both those questions. I am on the road to high fortune, fortune which you and I will share in happy days to come if you are as true to me as I am to you, though seeming estranged.

In a very little while, dear, my most anxious hopes will be realized. The realization is so near that it would be worse than folly to sacrifice those hopes now, as I must sacrifice them if I were to obey you, and say come to me.

'I long to see you, my heart aches, my soul sickens at the thought that we must wait for the hour of reunion. But I am not so weak a slave to impulse as to abandon my prize, just as it is almost won. We must wait, dearest. I ask from you patience and trust. I give you my daily prayers, my nightly dreams. There is no wrong-doing in my scheme of life. I injure no one, least of all do I wrong you. I only forego the happiness of sharing your life for a little while in order to make it brighter afterwards.

'Write to me, dear husband, from time to time, and let me write to you, but let our correspondence pass through the hands of that good girl, Jane Dimond. I know your impulsive nature, and I cannot trust you with my address, for fear you should come here and destroy all my plans. I am known in my present circle only as Miss Faunthorpe. All my hopes would be shipwrecked if I stood confessed as Mrs. Secretan. Yet, believe me, there is no shadow of wrong to you in this concealment. It is for our mutual welfare. You ask me about our child, Alexis. Our child, our son, is safe and well. I dare tell you no more than that.

'Ever, through all changes and dangers, your true and loving wife, 'SIBYL.'

'Is she mad?' Alexis asks himself, indignantly, after reading this letter. 'Does she think I am to be put off with loving words and assurances of constancy? Does she suppose that she can keep me at a distance by concealing her address and writing to me under cover to a housemaid? Wherever she may have hidden herself, my business shall be to find her, and my first visit shall be to Redcastle. I'll go straight to her uncle, the doctor, and unearth this mystery.'

END OF VOL. I.

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